

Article

Grants for Local Community Initiatives as a Way to Increase Public Participation of Inhabitants of Rural Areas

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Abstract: Increasing the participation of inhabitants in the activities of local authorities has been one of the topics in the discussion on sustainable development for a long time. In rural development, there is also a demand for increasing the participation of inhabitants. This is possible thanks, among other things, to tools that enhance bonds in local communities, encompassing processes based on the mechanisms of the co-creation and co-production of public services, or various forms of participation in the decision-making processes of self-government. In Poland, some regional self-governments (voivodeships) have introduced solutions based on a system of grants for small local communities (villages/sołectwa) linked to deliberative participation, co-creation, and co-production processes. The goal of this article is thus to analyse the design, operation, and scale of grant mechanisms implemented by regional authorities for local communities in Poland's rural areas (sołectwa). The first stage of the research process was a review of the literature, followed by analysis of the existing solutions and mechanisms for supporting small local communities in individual regions of Poland by financing or co-financing projects that engage inhabitants in the co-creation and co-production of public goods or services. Based on this, the key assumptions considered when creating this type of mechanism of support by voivodeship self-governments were determined. A subsequent stage of research involved analysing the case study of a solution introduced in 2016 by the Łódź regional self-government. The research results indicate that the analysed grant system model stimulates local communities that were previously passive/excluded by other programmes and that, as a result of the stable conditions of a grant contest, the process of "learning" and "imitating" the actions of the communities that succeeded occurs. The research results indicate that the proposed system of grants, which is conditionally based on the participation and co-operation of the inhabitants, seems to be an effective means of activating communities. The findings also point to features that could determine the success of the introduced grant model, such as its simplicity, limiting the bureaucracy (partially limiting the influence of local authorities on who obtains grants), and the transparency of the procedure.

Keywords: public participation; rural areas; regional self-government; conditional grants; co-creation; co-production; participatory budgeting; SDGs



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1. Introduction

One of the issues emerging in the subject literature, as well as in practice, is the formation of social capital [1–3] as a factor that might positively impact regional development. In practice, this thematic area may be encountered, among others, in the framework of actions financed from European Union (EU) resources—that is, the EAFRD or ERDF—or as part of national (Polish) regional actions—for instance, those defined in the Strategy for the Sustainable Development of Rural Areas, Agriculture and Fisheries 2012–2020

(SZRWRiR), or the Rural Development Programme 2014–2020. In the case of Poland, the above-indicated strategy is based on the model of sustainable (socially, economically, and environmentally) development and multifunctional growth. The key goal of the mentioned strategy is to improve the quality of life in rural areas, as well as to effectively use resources for the sustainable development of the country. In the strategy's detailed goals, a significant role is ascribed to increasing the quality of human and social capital, employment, and entrepreneurship in rural areas. The second detailed goal is improving living conditions in these areas. One of the priorities of the initial goal is to prevent and hinder social exclusion, and to activate the inhabitants of rural areas. This corresponds to the tasks indicated in the National Development Strategy 2020 "Active society . . . ", thus strengthening social capital in the local dimension through increasing awareness of the benefits stemming from co-operation, and shaping pro-social and pro-entrepreneurial attitudes. Strengthening social capital is possible thanks to the use of tools that, among other things, enhance bonds in local communities [4–6], and which encompass processes based on the mechanisms of co-creation and co-production of public services, or various forms of participation in the decision-making processes of regional self-governments.

The implementation of these strategies, goals, and priorities has resulted in already-existing Polish solutions (i.e., actions using Sołectki Funds, local action groups, or participatory budgets) being supplemented by subsequent actions directed towards increasing public participation in rural areas. These actions may be realised through a broad group of entities including the government, local and regional self-governments, and NGOs; however, Polish local self-governments have the largest possibilities and competencies in this regard at their disposal. The analysis of the introduced solutions reveals that some regional self-governments (voivodeships) have introduced solutions based on a system of grants for small local communities (villages/sołectwa), linked to the processes of deliberative participation, co-creation, and co-production. The first regional self-government to introduce this solution (in 2016), and which managed to maintain this grant system and its principles in subsequent years, was the Łódzkie Voivodeship (regions where the model was "conditional" due to limits or additional requirements are omitted). This enables an attempt to analyse this solution over the period 2016–2020, assuming the relative stability of the solution for the targeted communities. The objective of this article is thus to verify the following research hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *The formulated model of the system of grants stimulates local communities that were previously passive/excluded by other programmes.*

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *Those local communities in which other programmes operated based on public participation are able to apply for the new grants faster/more efficiently.*

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *As a result of the stable conditions of a grant contest, the process of "learning" from and "imitating" the actions of communities that succeeded occurs.*

It is worth noting that the use of the process based on the concept of participatory budgets in rural areas is less frequent than in the case of cities [7–10], and various issues stemming from the specificity of rural areas (e.g., the nature of farming work, territorial dispersion, a lack of willingness to co-operate, overly complicated procedures) may be encountered [11,12]. One should note that the research concerning relations between forms of participatory budget (PB) and social capital indicates the existence of such correlations [13]. However, measuring the efficiency of such processes with respect to increasing social capital on account of the lack of adequate metrics in public statistics is a complex task. In Poland, measuring social capital uses quantitative data concerning, among others, the number of NGOs, voter turnout, membership of clubs and teams, and readership of the local press, originating from Central Statistical Office data. The basic disadvantage here is that these data do not fulfil the majority of the key principles for the selection of the variables for quantitative tests: significance and normativity [14]. For this reason, an

assessment of the impact of the grant mechanism on the growth of social capital has not been undertaken.

An additional goal of the article is also an indication, based on the analysis of solutions adopted in the discussed grant contest, of what may determine the participation of a given community in the contest, as well as the barriers emerging in similar contests.

2. Materials and Methods

The discussed solution may be considered as a tool for funding expenditure targeted at improving the quality of life and wellbeing of local communities; it may also be investigated as an instrument for building social capital by increasing the engagement of the local community members, as well as the co-creation and co-production of public services—particularly in communities where no similar solutions have previously been applied (mainly Sołecki Funds). However, a direct effect of introducing this solution is the increase in the social participation of the members of small communities in rural areas.

The first stage of the research process was a review of the literature, the outcomes of which are presented in the next part of this work. The subsequent stage was the analysis of existing solutions for supporting small local communities in individual regions of Poland by financing or co-financing projects that engage inhabitants in the co-creation and co-production of public goods or services. Based on this, the key assumptions considered by voivodeship local governments when creating this type of support mechanism were determined. A subsequent stage of the research involved analysing the case study of a solution introduced in 2016 by the Łódź regional self-government which, first of all, is the longest (almost) functioning in Poland and, secondly, is fully compliant with the indicated assumptions. However, solely discussing the mechanism without attempting to assess the effects of its application would be like stopping halfway through the pursuit of a goal.

Hence, a question is raised about the possibility of measuring the efficiency of the discussed tool as an instrument that activates local communities. Measuring the effects and the impact of this type of action is not easy to do. One possibility is conducting survey-based research concerning the change of approach to local co-operation among inhabitants (ex-ante and ex-post); another is to measure the scale of engagement during individual project stages. It is not possible to use either of these methods for earlier realised actions. Another group of methods is testing changes in the level of electoral activities in certain communities—impossible here due to the lack of available data. The research may also concern changes in the activities of inhabitants following NGOs' actions—here, the issue of a lack of data also occurs at the level of the tested entities. Yet another potential method is conducting tests in the form of in-depth interviews with randomly selected inhabitants of rural areas from the Łódzkie region; however, due to COVID-19, such a research methodology is significantly hindered. This efficiency may be also verified by means of the acceptance of the contest conditions for granting support—the necessity of bottom-up actions, the inclusion of the deliberation processes of all inhabitants, co-creation, and co-production (later on, the factors for strengthening social capital are discussed). Thus, the scale of the demand expressed by local communities wishing to fulfil the conditions for obtaining a grant, as well as the scale of use of the available resources, will determine the degree of such acceptance. The last research method and, at the same time, the easiest of them in terms of being realised, is the use of data analysis concerning the granted financing for projects, combined with analysis of the data obtained from GUS (Statistics Poland) regarding the functioning of the Sołecki Fund (FS) in the region concerned.

The summary of the information regarding the functioning (or lack thereof) of an FS in a given municipality, together with that about the number of sołectwa that have accessed the programme support, allows an initial assessment of the programme's impact in terms of increasing public participation to be carried out. For this purpose, the available data regarding the use of funds from the FS in the years 2016–2019 were used in the research (from the GUS Local Data Bank [15]), as well as data concerning grants awarded within the framework of the discussed project in the years 2016–2020 (obtained from the

announcements of grant contests of the Marshal Office of the Łódź Voivodeship). Due to a lack of data from GUS regarding the FS for 2020, data from 2019 were applied in the analysis. The analysis of data covered the following stages:

- Obtaining data from announcements regarding the results of contests for funding;
- Obtaining data from the local data bank of GUS regarding realising the expenditure in the framework of the FS in municipalities;
- Comparative analysis concerning the awarded grants combined with the functioning of the FS in municipalities in individual years;
- Analysis of the scale of engagement of sołectwa in individual municipalities during the project's realisation.

3. State of the Art

3.1. Regional Development

The debate concerning the causes of diversified levels of development between individual regions, ways of measuring this diversification, and the reasonableness and potential impacts on these disparities has been active for several years now. This has led to multiple approaches and theories with respect to regional development [16–19]. The key concept of regional development has more than just one definition acceptable to all parties [20]. The OECD, an organisation involved in supporting regional development for years, defines it “as a general effort to enhance well-being and living standards in all region types, from cities to rural areas, and improve their contribution to national performance and more inclusive, resilient societies” [21]. In an attempt to define the key concept of regional development in scientific studies, Pike et al. [22] noted that “(n)o singularly agreed, homogeneous understanding of development of or for localities and regions exists. Particular notions of ‘development’ are socially determined by particular groups and/or interests in specific places and time periods.”. On the other hand, Nijkamp and Abreu pointed out that “regional development is clearly a multidimensional concept with a great socioeconomic variety that is determined by a multiplicity of factors” [23]. Thus, apart from the economic factors that impact regional development, non-economic factors are frequently stressed which, despite often being omitted in economic studies, frequently determine regional development [24]. Non-economic factors encompass, among other things, social capital, social ties, and social standards [25–27].

The concept of sustainable development dates back to the second half of the 20th century. Since then, several attempts have been made to define this concept and indicate its key pillars. One of the most frequently cited definitions in this regard is presented in the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) Commission, “Our Common Future” [28]. This commission indicated that “Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (p. 16). In subsequent years, the concept of sustainable development has become one of the key determinants of development policies worldwide [29–31]; it constituted the basis of the formation of an action plan, Agenda 21, during the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 [32], along with the Millennium Development Goals [33], Agenda 2030, and the Sustainable Development Goals [34]. Despite the fact that Agenda 21 already indicated “that national strategies be developed to address economic, social and environmental aspects of sustainable development” [35], its main areas of interest and impact were the environmental aspects of sustainable development. As late as 2002, in the course of negotiations at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, “a major shift in the perception of sustainable development—away from environmental issues toward social and economic development” [36] occurred.

The perception of sustainable development through the prism of regions, and the possibilities of these realising actions supporting sustainable development, have gained importance with the establishment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [34]. Meanwhile, in 2018, the document “*Delivering the Sustainable Development Goals at a Local and Regional Level*” [37] was launched; these were the recommendations to the European Com-

mission by the subgroup on “SDGs at a local and regional level” of the Multi-Stakeholder Platform on the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in the EU. This document pointed out how local and regional authorities play an important role in implementing the objectives of Agenda 2030 and the SDGs—not only SDG 11, but all SDGs and targets. In 2016, the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments (. . .) drew up a roadmap to support local and regional governments in the implementation and monitoring of the SDGs [38]. This resulted in substantial interest and implementation of actions in this respect, undertaken by various regional authorities [39]. Furthermore, various scientific publications indicate that individual SDGs (in the framework of the three main distinguished pillars) cannot be achieved unless regional and local authorities are engaged [40–44]. The above stems from the fact that subnational governments are capable, under their internal regional policies, of “using the development potential of each area, in order to stimulate a progressive adjustment of the local economic system to the changing economic environment” [20]. They are able to impact (boost, support) the bottom-up processes and actions designated to support regional development [45]. In practice, these actions are also frequently targeted, aside from improving the quality of life or environmental effects, at enhancing civil awareness, strengthening social bonds, and building the foundations of co-operation with governmental institutions.

One of the areas that involve both central and subnational governments’ regional development policies is the development of rural areas. Deliberations on this matter were undertaken as early as the 1950s [46] (p. 437), and the key focus evolved around the topic of agricultural development, which remained a crucial point of view in discussions related to rural development [47,48]. Today, there is a consensus in the scientific literature when it comes to rural development as an issue that needs to be approached multidimensionally, “including economic aspects, infrastructure and service considerations, sociocultural factors, and the role of stakeholders” [49]. There is no generally accepted concept of rural development (which is caused by a substantial diversification of rural areas), whilst some authors summarise the multiplicity of concepts, noting that “rural development actually has a body of theory, but (. . .) the corpus of that theory consists of hundreds if not thousands of individualised, informal models residing one by one in the minds of some or other practitioner in rural development” [50]. Nevertheless, attempts to define the modern vision of rural development ought to be highlighted. In accordance with the concept proposed by the World Bank, “rural development is a strategy designed to improve the economic and social life of a specific group of people—the rural poor. It involves extending the benefits of development to the poorest among those who seek a livelihood in the rural areas” [51] (p. 3). Rural development is similarly described by Moseley, who claims that “rural development refers to the process of improving the quality of life and economic well-being of people” [52] (p. 3). Singh [53], on the other hand, noted that “in a nutshell, the process of rural development must represent the entire gamut of changes by which a social system moves away from a state of life perceived as ‘unsatisfactory’ towards a materially and spiritually better condition of life”. Furthermore, within the Cork 2.0 Declaration [54], the EU member states stressed “the need to ensure that rural areas and communities (countryside, farms, villages, and small towns) remain attractive places to live and work by improving access to services and opportunities”. The above-noted Singh also cites the “core values of development” [55]—the basic necessities of life, self-respect, and freedom indicated by Todaro, considering them to be crucial in properly defining rural development.

Moreover, a debate has appeared in the context of rural areas with regard to their sustainable development. Akgün et al. [56] distinguished five types of factors determining sustainable development in rural areas; among them, one may point to the factors of social nature (social system); these represent an openness of inhabitants to undertaking common actions for the development of rural areas (openness), the ability to create and develop social relations (social relations), and co-operation capacity (participation). This, thus, refers to the idea of civil society and building social capital. In the meantime, Bryden [57]

indicates that the policies of rural development ought to be directed, among others, towards strengthening rural inhabitants' participation. He also raises the question of how to improve the processes of inhabitant participation "in public decision-making".

3.2. Social Capital and Civil Society in Regional Development Policy

Social capital is normally defined as the relations between humans that strengthen common actions. However, several approaches to the concept of social capital may be distinguished, depending on the given scientific discipline. According to the report elaborated on by the OECD in 2001, "The Well-being of Nations: The Role of Human and Social Capital", there are four basic approaches to its definition—anthropological, sociological, economic, and political [58]. Despite various approaches to the essence of social capital and its definition, it seems unquestionable that it ought to assist in solving the common issues of a given society. Based on the observed correlations of individual homogeneous groups of local societies and among them (including their members), the scientific literature indicates two (bonding and bridging [59] (p. 24)) or three (bonding, bridging, and linking [60]) types of social capital. One homogeneous group encompasses bonding social capital (family, social organisation, and sport club types of relations), whereas bridging social capital refers to the relationships between persons and groups possessing different features (views, value systems, goals, etc.). On the other hand, linking social capital is related to the relationships between the groups and the authorities (those in power). Bobbio [61] suggests that democratic deliberation is capable of developing social capital among the groups that participate in deliberation processes. Nevertheless, following Baiocchi et al. [62], this has a rather limited impact on civil society—the functioning of which, in the opinion of the latter, is determined by historical events that occurred within a given society (see also the topic of social capital path dependency [63]). Meanwhile, Mandarano notes that the occurring social interactions may shape social capital and trust [64]. The scientific literature is not entirely consistent when it comes to the impacts of social capital and civil society on local and regional development [65] or economic growth [66]. Nevertheless, in recent years, the volume of scientific research confirming the thesis regarding the existence of such links has increased [67], even though, as pointed out by Westlund and Larsson [68], the theoretical bases of the existence of a causal link between civil activity and the development of regions are still insufficient; having analysed the outcomes of research devoted to the issue of social capital's impact on regional development, they note that its significance continues to increase, while the core problem from the perspective of researchers seems to be how to measure its impact.

As may be noticed, one of the key axes of the solutions elaborated on in this study, apart from social capital, is the concept of civil society. Due to the fact that, depending on the scientific discipline and the context, this is defined in various ways [69], the authors of this article have assumed the definition of a civil society proposed by Michael Edwards in *The Oxford Handbook of Civil Society* as, in our opinion, it reflects our point of view to the greatest extent. In line with the above-noted definition, "civil society is the sphere of uncorrected human association between individual and the state in which people undertake collective action for normative and substantive purposes, relatively independent of the government and the market" [70]. Civil society, perceived in a broad sense, will not be narrowed down here to the "third pillar institutions" often identified with it, but rather, it will comprise inhabitants, jointly engaged in common actions and debates, able to co-act for the common good while accessing the social capital resources at their disposal. Such an approach stems from the focus on an individual and their interactions with the environment, since it is the individuals who need to have a relevant potential of social capital at their disposal in order to co-act with others [71]. Hence, the Putnam features of social capital—such as trust and the norms of reciprocity—will be of the essence here. Thanks to enabling a society to learn how to co-operate through the processes of deliberation, an increased level of trust, the skills of co-acting, or building common values may be expected. On the other hand, it may impact the formation of skills related to co-operation among the inhabitants.

The above-described processes of deliberations constitute one of the forms of civil participation in the decisions undertaken by authorities (local territorial governments) regarding the extent and directions of spending resources. Civil participation, in the form of various types of consultation with respect to the decisions undertaken by the “governing bodies”, is a phenomenon that is closely related to the functioning of a democratic state. A classic concept of the levels of participation to which researchers tend to refer to is Arnstein’s ladder of citizen participation [72]. More than 60 expanding or alternative concepts of the participation of citizens in actions of public institutions [73] have been launched on the basis of this model or in reaction to it. The following models are frequently presented as examples (see [9]): Connor’s (new rungs of Arnstein’s ladder) [74], Wilcox’s (three dimensions perspective: levels, phases, and people) [75], Timney’s (three models of participation: active, transitional, and passive) [76], and the International Association for Public Participation’s (IAP2) public participation spectrum (five levels of participation) [77]. The diversification of perspectives on civil participation also stems from the perception of its place in individual concepts of public management, from new public management (e.g., Timney [76]—citizens as consumers), public value (e.g., Bryson et al. [78]—participative citizens), and new public governance (e.g., Pestoff [79]—citizens as co-producers of public services).

The postulated involvement of inhabitants in the processes of undertaking decisions of state authorities that concern them directly (including directions, form, and scale of public expenditure) finds its reflection in the numerous and diverse forms of public participation [7,80,81]. The most recognisable are those that function mainly in the cities—the broadly understood participatory budgets (PBs) [82]. However, in the case of smaller societies, it is possible to apply instruments that engage and integrate the inhabitants with more intensity. These measures are an extension of the PB concept related to the co-creation and co-production of public services by the inhabitants. The use of such instruments may thus facilitate the strengthening of social capital. This results from the essence of these solutions, as discussed, for instance, by Brandsen et al. [83]. Thus, co-creation is usually associated with the active participation of inhabitants at the stage of creating the concept of the future public service that is to be delivered to them. On the other hand, in this approach, co-production signifies the active co-operation of inhabitants in the process of creating the proposed public good (the selection of preferred features, adjustment to the preferences, participation in provision), and is rather similar to the concept of co-production proposed by E. Ostrom [84]. A discrepancy in the possibility of selecting the public good that will be provided is apparent—in the case of co-production, a prior choice was made (either by inhabitants or the authorities). In such construed processes, the inhabitants are able to choose both the goal of spending public funds—in an open discussion involving the whole community (the public good designated to be provided to them)—and its features. There is also a possibility, at subsequent stages, to actively participate in creating and managing it. This solution will be deliberated upon in a subsequent part of this article.

3.3. Regional Self-Government in Poland Versus Regional Development, Civil Society, and Citizen Participation in Public Management

In the process of decentralising the system of public finance in Poland, a large portion of competencies for conducting regional policy were handed over to the voivodeship local governments (regions). In accordance with the binding provisions of law, regional local governments form and implement strategies of regional development in their respective areas, which in practice indicates the possibility of establishing the direction, conditions, and tools for the region’s further development [85]. Within the individual regional development strategies, Polish voivodeship local governments refer, either directly or indirectly, to the SDGs contained within the subsequent national development strategies for Poland [86,87] and its regions [88]. As a result, the development of civil society, followed by an increase in the possibility of civil participation in participatory /deliberative democratic processes, also enters into the scope of their actions.

In the case of Poland, there are multiple possibilities for the participation of inhabitants in managing public matters. These also include, apart from participation in parliament and local government elections, the various forms of broadly understood social consultations guaranteed to the citizens by law. Actions in the scope of deliberative and participatory democracy are conducted at various levels of public authority [7,89]—mainly, however, at the municipality level. Some of the most recognisable are participatory budgets, which have been in place in the cities for almost 10 years. The second form involves FSs in rural areas. The occurrence of both of these forms depends to a large extent on the political will of local politicians. These solutions give the citizens the opportunity to actively shape the financial economy of their local self-government. As the latter of the indicated forms is used in smaller communities (sołectwo—this usually covers one village; that is, several dozen to several hundred inhabitants), the roles of a discussion among the whole local community, and co-operation and negotiation when designing, implementing, and using solutions, are crucial. In the opinion of several authors, such actions support the local society [90–92]. However, in the case of some municipalities, despite the postulates formed by local communities, FSs are not launched by local authorities. The frequently indicated causes for this are a lack of political will, a lack of financial resources, and a lack of willingness to co-operate among local government authorities and the inhabitants [93].

It may be noted that in this situation, some Polish local governments wishing to strengthen the local community and, at the same time, realise its tasks, decide to undertake actions supporting the development of social capital and civil society. In order to achieve this, they implement other regional PBs that normally supplement the local and supra-local PBs [94]. In recent years, in addition to regional PBs, the regional self-governments of several voivodeships have also introduced certain new instruments targeted at supporting the above-indicated local communities by financing small projects via grants designated for the improvement of wellbeing, increasing levels of public participation, and strengthening civil society at the sołectwa level (indicating such reasons for the introduction of these grants). These actions are entirely consistent with regional development strategies, and are associated with the forms of co-creation and co-production. Due to the accepted funding application procedure, the inhabitants, rather than the territorial local governments, must get involved in the areas for which the projects are planned to be realised.

A broadly understood PB is characterised by the attention drawn to the topic of the direction of the distribution of funds, where this occurs in the whole territorial area of the local government entity, the annual nature of the process, inclusion of the deliberation process of inhabitants, and accountability of the effects of the process [95]. The analysis of solutions in the regions that strived to implement systems of supporting local communities via the use of processes similar to the PB formula indicates that these solutions are normally based on the following assumptions:

- The necessity of inhabitants undertaking bottom-up initiatives;
- Creating a project based on a discussion process involving all inhabitants and achieving a consensus (co-creation);
- The possibility of the active engagement of inhabitants when realising a project (co-production);
- The lack of necessity to co-finance the project from other sources;
- The possibility of applying for project funding with an omission of local authorities;
- The obligatory nature of projects being approved by the donor;
- Matching the regional development strategy and compliance with the tasks of the regional local government authorities;
- Multicriteria assessment of a complex project, and qualification for funding according to the contest's principles.

It is clear that the issue of strong engagement of inhabitants at each stage of project creation and realisation is of importance here. Nevertheless, not all regional local governments apply identical solutions. Certain solutions that deviate from the described pattern in certain areas can be pointed out. From amongst the 16 regions of Poland, 11 voivodeships apply the model in question (with small differences). The first region that

implemented the discussed tool is the Łódzkie Voivodeship, which is the case study that will be analysed.

4. Results

4.1. Grant Programmes from Regional Self-Governments for Small Local Communities in Rural Areas in Poland

The small grant programmes for local communities in rural areas are currently implemented in Poland by 11 voivodeships. The remaining five have not implemented such an instrument of public participation. In 10 voivodeships, the programmes consist of awarding grants to new proposals/projects, with one (the Małopolskie Voivodeship) awarding financial prizes for activities implemented earlier. The voivodeships have different lengths of experience in implementing the analysed forms of financial support—from quite long ago (e.g., Dolnośląskie Voivodeship—11 years) to a relatively short time (e.g., Opolskie Voivodeship—2 years). Therefore, they differ in their experience in terms of their creation and implementation, which may influence the final form of the adopted solutions. The amounts allocated for the implementation of a single project also vary and, depending on the voivodship, range from PLN 5000 to PLN 60,000. This may have an impact on the types of projects submitted by villages in various regions of the country (together with the catalogue of projects accepted by each voivodship under the grant programme). The objectives of the implemented programmes in the analysed voivodeships are similar, and focus on (see Table 1):

- Supporting, stimulating, and promoting the activity of the region's rural population;
- Improving the quality of life in villages;
- Promoting actions supporting the creation of conditions for the development of social capital and a sense of regional identity;
- Integration of the rural community;
- Supporting local democracy and civil society.

An essential element of the discussed instrument is the necessity (or lack thereof) for the beneficiary to provide its own contribution—that is, a percentage of the eligible or total costs (Table 2). In the case of seven voivodeships, the grant structure imposes on the beneficiary the obligation to provide such a contribution. This amount varies from 20% (Opolskie Voivodeship, Śląskie Voivodeship, Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodeship) to 50% (Dolnośląskie Voivodeship, Mazowieckie Voivodeship, Podlaskie Voivodeship). Only in the case of two voivodeships—Łódzkie and Zachodniopomorskie—does the grant cover all costs. In the case of the Małopolskie Voivodeship, due to the different structure of the instrument (in the form of an award), there is no requirement for the beneficiary to contribute. However, an earlier investment of funds in the implementation of the awarded activity is required. The requirement to contribute or have invested funds in the earlier implemented activities is a barrier to the grants in the less developed and poorer communes. Another vital issue for beneficiaries is the possibility of co-financing the project with other funds (from the EU, state budget, or FS). While the possibility of co-financing from external sources is not possible in almost all programmes (the Zachodniopomorskie Voivodeship is an exception), the inclusion of an FS as an additional source of financing is allowed in many voivodeships (the Mazowieckie, Opolskie, Śląskie, Warmińsko-Mazurskie, and Wielkopolskie Voivodeships). In the case of six voivodeships, grant programmes are included in the voivodeship development strategies, and are instruments for their implementation (the Łódzkie, Mazowieckie, Pomorskie, Warmińsko-Mazurskie, Wielkopolskie and Zachodniopomorskie voivodships). From the perspective of this article, it should be noted that, most often, voivodeships refer to the aim of community development and building strong social capital through increasing citizen participation.

Table 1. Main goals of the grant programmes.

Voivodeship	Main Goals of the Grant Programmes
Dolnośląskie	Supporting the activity of the rural population in the region by meeting the most urgent needs for the improvement of living conditions in rural areas.
Łódzkie	Supporting and promoting local community initiatives.
Małopolskie	Supporting the activity of local communities by awarding villages and their inhabitants who are actively involved in making Małopolska's villages more attractive and improving their residents' quality of life.
Mazowieckie	Promoting actions stimulating, for example, the multifunctional development of rural areas, the effective use of the potential of rural areas, and promoting actions supporting the creation of conditions for the development of social capital and a sense of regional identity.
Opolskie	Enabling the inhabitants of villages to influence the allocation of funds from the voivodeship budget to projects that support, promote, develop, integrate, and stimulate the activation of local communities.
Podlaskie	Integrating the rural community, forming a new concept of an innovative village, activating local communities, and disseminating and promoting the Smart Villages concept in the rural space.
Pomorskie	Supporting the development of local democracy and civil society. Implementing the ideas contained in the strategic documents of the local government. Strengthening local identity and integration. Effectively using and stimulating the growth potential of rural areas. Improving the spatial order. Preserving the cultural and natural heritage and landscape.
Śląskie	Involving residents in achieving the following goals: shaping the national and civic awareness of the inhabitants; stimulating economic activity; increasing the competitiveness and economic innovation of the voivodeship; preserving the value of the cultural and natural environment; shaping and maintaining of the spatial order.
Warmińsko-Mazurskie	Promoting activities for modernising rural areas through supporting projects that increase the level of involvement of local communities; building strong social capital in line with the provincial development strategy; selecting and recommending projects to be subsidised.
Wielkopolskie	Supporting initiatives of inhabitants of villages participating in the "Wielkopolska Renewal of Villages" programme for the development of their own village.
Zachodnio pomorskie	Supporting the development of local democracy and civil society, and strengthening the identity and integration of the local community at the initiative of the village. Distinguishing those villages that undertake particularly important initiatives in support of local democracy and civil society. Identifying and disseminating effective practices of supporting local democracy and developing civil society.

Table 2. Differences between grant programmes.

Voivodeship	Maximum Grant per Project (PLN) (Year)	Own Contribution	Co-Funding from Sołeczki Fund	Other External Co-Funding	Fits into the Region's Strategy?
Dolnośląskie	30,000 (2021)	Yes, mandatory over 50% of eligible costs	-	No	-
Łódzkie	10,000 (2021)	Yes, possible	-	-	Yes
Małopolskie	10,000 to 60,000	-	-	-	-
Mazowieckie	10,000 (2021)	Yes, mandatory over 50% of eligible costs	Yes	No	Yes
Opolskie	5000 (2020)	Yes, mandatory over 20% of grant	Yes	No	-
Podlaskie	15,000 (2020)	Yes, mandatory over 50% of total costs	-	No	-
Pomorskie	10,000 (2020)	Yes, possible	-	-	Yes
Śląskie	10,000 or 6000 (2020)	Yes, mandatory over 20% of eligible costs	Yes	No	-
Warmińsko-Mazurskie	15,000 (2020)	Yes, mandatory over 20% of total costs	Yes	No	Yes
Wielkopolskie	Min 10,000, max 30,000 (2021)	Yes, mandatory over 30% of eligible costs	Yes	No	Yes
Zachodniopomorskie	10,000 (2021)	Yes, possible	-	Yes	Yes

The analysis allows us to indicate the elements of the construction of the discussed mechanism of support for public participation in rural areas, which may reduce its impact. These are:

- The requirement of the beneficiary's own financial contribution;
- The requirement of prior execution of the project for which the financial award will be granted (also limits the chances of poorer and less developed municipalities);
- Making the possibility of the grant application conditional on participation in another programme intended for villages—the Wielkopolskie Voivodeship is an example. Such a mechanism causes some municipalities to be excluded from the competition for formal reasons;
- The lack of the possibility of co-financing the project's implementation with other sources (e.g., EU funds or FSs);
- There may be a significant narrowing of the catalogue of projects eligible for financing.

4.2. Case Study

Since 2016, the local government of the Łódź Voivodeship (regional self-government—belonging to the highest of the three levels of territorial local government structure in Poland) has been carrying out its financial assistance programme for the co-financing of projects in its municipalities (the lowest level of local government) in rural areas with the active participation of inhabitants. Supporting and promoting local community initiatives, social activity, activating inhabitants, and building civil awareness as well as local identity constitute the key goals of financial support for the submitted projects. An indication of the efforts to integrate local environments appears here as well [96]. This programme fits into the regional development strategy in place for the years 2007–2020. One of the priority areas indicated in this policy was civil society. Within the strategy, the following was indicated: “The creation of civil society in the Łódź Region is one of the factors that can contribute to the increase in abilities of the regional community to adapt to changing external conditions.” [97] (p. 24). For the strategic goal of increasing the level of social activity, the following detailed goals were adopted: to support social initiatives that can lead to increasing social integration; to create and support the development and co-operation of civil society institutions; and to support measures and mechanisms for the improvement of the efficiency of community activities based on the rules of social dialogue [97] (p. 24). According to the principle of subsidiarity, regional local government supports ventures that cannot be realised (due to various reasons—among others, financial ones) by the lower level local governments. Thus, by definition, the described tool constitutes a supplementation of the actions undertaken by local governments for strengthening civil society and improving the quality of life.

The course of the process of applying for a fund for a sołectwo/village may be divided into two stages:

1. First of all, creating and submitting applications:
 - The inhabitants of a given town, during a civil meeting (of the whole community), by way of a resolution, undertake a decision concerning the choice of project they would like to realise. The meeting of the inhabitants is for presenting ideas and discussing them. The inhabitants do not need to limit themselves to just one meeting; however, the result of the vote on the choice of the discussed projects (resolution) is binding;
 - The village leader (the representative of the inhabitants) turns to the municipal authorities with a motion for a grant to be obtained from the voivodeship’s local government for a given project. A local community cannot directly apply to the voivodeship local government, due to legal reasons, and to the fact that there are a limited number of projects that can be financed in the area of a given municipality in a given year;
 - Municipal authorities make their choice of a maximum of three projects for a given year, and direct the motion for the funding of them to the voivodeship’s local government. Here, we face the first issue related to the arbitrariness of the selection of projects to be financed at the level of a municipality.
2. Secondly, the awarding of a grant and realising projects:
 - The donor (voivodeship local government) carries out an initial assessment of the conceptual and formal correctness of the applications;
 - The donor (voivodeship local government), based on the criteria, then creates a ranked list of projects, and assigns resources in accordance with the order of the projects on the list;
 - The funds are assigned in accordance with the plan for realising the submitted projects, and then settled in accordance with the provisions concerning spending public funds (including verification of the manner of project realisation).

The requirements faced by the submitted projects, and the manner of assessing them, are of significance here. The most crucial of these include project realisation supporting local

community integration, fulfilment of needs submitted by the local community, contributing to community growth, and engagement in realisation of inhabitants (free of charge). These requirements are reflected in the assessment criteria for the projects when establishing the ranking list.

One of the basic assessment criteria is the degree of engagement of inhabitants in the project's realisation. Yet another is the support of integration among the inhabitants. Each of these categories constitutes between 20% and 30% of the whole project assessment. With subsequent editions, the importance of the substantive part in the projects grew—ultimately reaching 55% of the whole assessment (that is, justification of the need, fitting into the character of a given location, and coherence with other actions in the area of that city and municipality). Furthermore, the possibility of the applicant also voluntarily co-financing the project was introduced; however, the weight of co-financing decreased from 30% to 5% of the whole assessment. It ought to be underlined that, in the case of projects that obtained an even number of points, the order on the ranking list was determined by better assessment of the first criterion (participation of inhabitants).

4.3. Quantitative Data Results

The analysis covered all sołectwa (3497) from the area of the 159 existing rural communes and urban–rural municipalities of the whole Łódź Voivodeship in the years 2016–2020. The available data concerned the allocated grants (the list of submitted applications for funding is not available). In the years 2016–2019, the local government of the Łódź Voivodeship gradually increased funding under the programme to reach an amount of PLN 4 million by 2020, decreasing to PLN 3 million (Table 2), which had an impact on the changes in the level of the analysed data. In the tested period, 1089 (unique) sołectwa/villages accessed the discussed support instrument for local communities; however, 534 were located within the territory of municipalities that did not introduce FSs (Figure 1). Approximately 15% of sołectwa obtained funding more than once (Table 3). A total of 11,259 grants were approved. At the same time, it should be noted that only 1 of the 159 entitled municipalities had no programme beneficiary in the whole investigated period (it was also a municipality in which no FS operated).

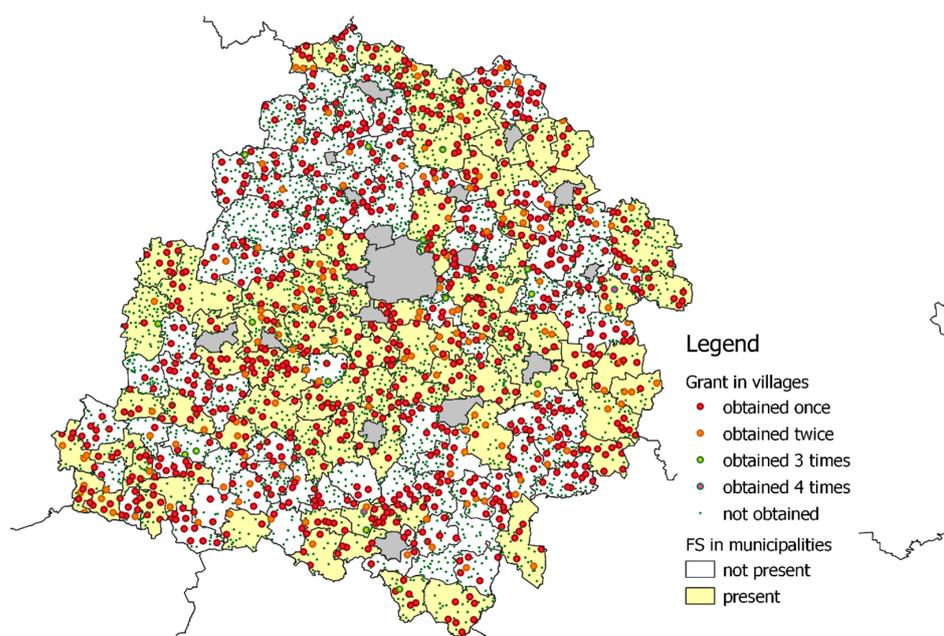


Figure 1. Territorial distribution of beneficiaries of the programme in the years 2016–2020 in the region, including the occurrence of a Sołectki Fund (2019).

Table 3. Number of municipalities with consideration of the number of grants in a given year.

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Grants per municipality: 1	47	60	23	11	61
Grants per municipality: 2	6	61	48	9	38
Grants per municipality: 3	0	0	61	127	55
Grants per municipality: 4	1	0	0	0	0
Total municipalities with grants	54	121	132	147	154
More than 1 grant per municipality	7	61	109	136	93

The analysis of municipalities in the areas from which the sołectwa originated (Table 4) indicates that municipalities in an area where an FS was in place, as well as those without a fund, accessed funding to a very similar degree. With the passage of time, the number of communes with beneficiaries in the programme increased. Due to the fact that the decision regarding the introduction or liquidation of an FS may be undertaken each year, minor changes year by year may be spotted in the number of municipalities without an FS. Nevertheless, from the point of view of the whole tested period, the structure of municipalities that decided to introduce an FS did not change in any significant manner.

Table 4. Structure of the communes in the areas from which the programme beneficiaries originate, considering the presence of a Sołeckie Fund in the municipalities.

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total
Total municipalities	159	159	159	159	159	159
Total municipalities with grants	54	121	132	147	154	-
Total unique municipalities (2016–2020)	-	-	-	-	-	158
Total municipalities without FS	76	82	76	76	76 *	-
Unique municipalities without FS with grants	27	59	58	68	72	-
Unique municipalities without FS (2016–2020)	-	-	-	-	-	75
Amount allocated to grants (million PLN)	0.5	1.5	3	4	3	-

* data form 2019 year.

Taking into consideration the location of the village/sołectwo in the area of individual municipalities, it can be stated that in 2020 almost all municipalities fulfilling the requirements of the programme had at least one sołectwo/village benefiting from a grant. The number of municipalities in which grants were obtained by more than one sołectwo/village also gradually increased (from 7 in 2016 to 136 in 2019, with a drop to 93 in 2020). Until 2019, the number of approved co-financing projects gradually increased, from 63 in the first year (pilot) to 410 in 2019 (Table 5). In 2020, the number of approved projects had already dropped to 302. The scale of available financing shifted correspondingly—in 2020 the funds available decreased.

Table 5. Number of grants in municipalities for each year.

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Grants per municipality: 1	47	60	23	11	61
Grants per municipality: 2	12	122	96	18	38
Grants per municipality: 3	0	0	61	381	165
Grants per municipality: 4	4	0	0	0	0
Total grants	63	182	302	410	302

When considering the use of grants by sołectwa/villages located in the area of the municipalities in which an FS was not introduced in a given year, they constituted approximately half of all beneficiaries of grants in the whole period from 2016 to 2020. An increase in the number of sołectwa from individual municipalities obtaining grants in subsequent years is also noticeable. Bearing in mind the number of grants obtained by individual municipalities, it seems reasonable to note that with the passage of time and an increase in the volume of funds, the number of financed projects in individual municipalities grew, regardless of the existence of an FS within the area of the municipality (Tables 6 and 7). An in-depth analysis of the data indicates that in the case of several dozen municipalities from both groups, at least two projects from both groups were financed each year.

Table 6. Municipalities without an FS, according to the number of sołectwa participating in the programme.

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Grants per municipality: 1	23	29	9	4	25
Grants per municipality: 2	4	30	18	6	16
Grants per municipality: 3	0	0	31	58	31
Grants per municipality: 4	0	0	0	0	0
Total municipalities	27	59	58	68	72
More than 1 grant per municipality	4	30	49	64	47

Table 7. Municipalities with an FS, according to the number of sołectwa participating in the programme.

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Grants per municipality: 1	24	31	14	7	36
Grants per municipality: 2	2	31	30	3	22
Grants per municipality: 3	0	0	30	69	24
Grants per municipality: 4	1	0	0	0	0
Total municipalities	27	62	74	79	82
More than 1 grant per municipality	3	31	60	72	46

5. Discussion

The solution introduced by the Łódź regional self-government is characterised by a significant similarity to the features of participatory budgets applied in municipal areas. However, it must be noted that the proposed solution may have a significantly stronger impact on the creation of binding and bridging social capital, as a result of subjecting the financing to the active inclusion of inhabitants in the whole process of creating and realising the project. This stems from the accepted principles of preparing projects, as well as the qualification criteria and, subsequently, the assessment of projects while generating the ranking list. This triggers the necessity of establishing co-operation between inhabitants in order to achieve a common goal. Such co-operation, on the other hand, is based on the processes of the deliberation of the whole society (in the course of elaborating an application for funding) and the division of competencies and active co-action (while realising the project); it is thus an example of a tool that teaches co-action in the framework of smaller communities.

Meanwhile, the success in obtaining a grant and realising projects by individual communities (sołectwa, villages) seems to be, on the one hand, an incentive for applying for funds in subsequent years (for those who were successful, see Figure 1), while on the other hand, it is an incentive for the remaining local communities to follow (the “snowball” effect—see the increase in the number of grants and sołectwa—Tables 3–7), and confirms H3 (as a result of the stable conditions of a grant contest, the process of

“learning” and “imitating” the actions of the communities that succeeded occurs). Thus, from the perspective of regional authorities striving to increase public participation and citizen engagement, the long-term application of this type of solution seems desirable.

Bearing in mind that the regional level of territorial local government may support local governments in realising their projects, the question ought to be asked as to whether there is really a demand for the introduced solution. In Polish conditions, one of the basic tools of participation of the members of local societies in rural areas is an FS. Notwithstanding the above, the launch of an FS is determined by local authorities upon the request of the inhabitants. In the Łódź Voivodeship, approximately 60% of municipalities introduced this fund. A question thus arises as to whether the tool proposed by the local voivodeship government will be used by the inhabitants in those regions where local authorities decided not to introduce it.

Our results indicate that the demand for such a mechanism is high, regardless of the presence or absence of an FS in the area of a given municipality (Tables 6 and 7). These data seem to confirm H1 (the formulated model of the system of grants stimulates local communities that were previously passive/excluded by other programmes). At the same time, it is noticeable that in subsequent years there was a slightly greater use of grants by local communities in which an FS was operating, which seems to be a partial confirmation of H2 (those local communities in which other programmes operated based on public participation are able to apply for the new grants faster/more efficiently).

The demand for this formula (as simply as possible) is also confirmed by the full allocation of grant funds in subsequent years, as well as a large number of municipalities in which the upper limit of three grants per municipality was met in the subsequent years of the programme. This may stem, among other things, from adjusting the scope of the possible actions for financing the projects submitted by inhabitants (mainly for improving wellbeing), and the simplicity, limited bureaucracy (partially limiting the influence of local authorities on who obtains grants), and transparency of the procedure.

6. Conclusions

The goal of this article was to analyse the design, operation, and scale of grant mechanisms implemented by regional self-governments for local communities in Polish rural areas (sołectwa). Rural communities in Poland are only partly covered by citizen participation programmes (in the form of FSs), as opposed to the majority of the Polish urban communities. For increasing public participation, the regional local government may use tools based on the participation of inhabitants in the processes of the co-creation and co-production of goods and public services targeted at improving the quality of life, which may encompass the discussed system of grants for sołectwa/villages introduced by the Łódź Voivodeship—and also applied by other regional self-governments in Poland.

Our results indicate that the analysed grant system model stimulates local communities that were previously passive/excluded by other programmes, and that as a result of the stable conditions of a grant contest, the process of “learning” from and “imitating” the actions of the communities that succeeded occurs. The results of our research indicate that the proposed system of conditional grants based on the participation and co-operation of the inhabitants seems to be an effective way of activating small communities. Our results also indicate the features that determine the success of the solution in question. These features may be considered as a certain universal pattern that can possibly be used both by other regional local governments in Poland and in other countries with a multilevel structure of self-governments with respect to small communities in order to increase public participation. These features include:

- The substantive scope of the financed projects ought to concern matters that are of importance to the local community (attracting the attention of the inhabitants);
- The community ought to be able to freely choose the goal of a project through the process of deliberation, engaging the majority of inhabitants and leading to a consensus (building the skills of discussing and reaching common goals);

- The inhabitants should be able to actively participate in realising a project (building the feeling of co-responsibility, social capital);
- The process of applying for funding ought to be as independent of “intermediaries” as possible—that is, of local authorities carrying out the initial selection of projects (limiting bureaucracy, limiting politicisation of the process);
- The inclusion of the co-creation and co-production of public services and goods as an element of assessing projects (promoting co-participation of inhabitants).

As previously stated, in order to obtain a full view of the impact, such research ought to be conducted in a given community before and after a project is realised. In the analysed case, such research may be carried out ex-post. Thus, the subsequent stage of research ought to be qualitative research with the inhabitants (as beneficiaries) and regional self-government representatives (as policymakers) concerning their motivation and assessment of the discussed tool.

We trust that this article will contribute to the ongoing debate concerning rural areas and regions with regard to the issues related to increasing public participation. Furthermore, we hope that it will constitute a voice in the discussion concerning the possible forms of civil participation in co-governing, the place of participation processes in realising SDGs, and the realisation of regional development policy by regional self-governments in rural areas.

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