

Empirical Paper

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Public participation in rural areas supported by regional governments in the context of sustainable rural development: The case of Poland

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Abstract: The processes involved in the sustainable development goals (SDGs) localization, sustainable rural development (SRD), and the use of public participation to support the achievement of the SDGs have gained importance in recent years. The aim of this article is to analyze the solution created by regional governments in Poland to combine these issues. This paper utilizes a qualitative case study-based approach. Firstly, the analysis of the development strategies of 11 Polish regions was carried out. Further, the analyses of the grant process allowed one to determine the SDG targets, which are associated with individual thematic areas of financing and with specific tasks proposed for implementation by the residents. It may be concluded that the analyzed program targets largely corresponded to the selected SDG targets. Such programs may be used as a tool for supporting the bottom-up diagnosis procedure, in the scope of desired activities supporting the achievement of the SDGs.

Keywords: grants, citizen participation, small communities, subnational government, countryside

JEL Classification: H72, O35, Q01

1 Introduction

In the course of the recent years, ensuring sustainable rural development (SRD) has become one of the most significant matters in discussions focused on achieving the goals of the 2030 Agenda [UNDESA, 2021, p. 2]. Since the 1970s, there have been postulates emerging in the public discussions associated with the above-mentioned issue. Nevertheless, despite the passage of time and the intensification of activities implemented in support of SRD, the development policies carried out by individual countries still do not have a chance to achieve the socioeconomic and environmental sustainable development goals (SDGs), which are the point of reference for most countries. It should be noted that for several years, the UN has been strongly emphasizing the necessity of localizing the SDGs, understood as “the process of defining, implementing and monitoring strategies at the local level for achieving global, national, and subnational sustainable development goals” [UNDP and UN Habitat, 2016]. The framework resolution “Transforming our world:

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the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” states: “Governments and public institutions will also work closely on implementation with regional and local authorities, subregional institutions, international institutions, academia, philanthropic organizations, volunteer groups and others” [United Nations, 2015].

One of the methods—postulated in literature and practice—intended for supporting the implemented sustainable development programs at the local level is the local community participation [Abaza and Baranzini, 2002, p. 6; Cooper and Vargas, 2004, p. 284]. Studies carried out in many countries confirm the possible impact of various participation processes, which are implemented at the local level, on the possibility of accelerating the achievement of the SDGs [Cabannes, 2019; UN-Habitat, 2020]. In the scope of rural areas, the concept of local community participation had already been developing in the 1970s and 1980s [The World Bank, 1994, p. 5]. Along with the evolution of the range of the sustainable development concept, the perception of the scope, subject, and meaning of public participation has also changed in these areas [Ahmad and Abu Talib, 2011]. The most visible form of public participation is the participatory budgeting (PB), which primarily concerns urban areas [Dias, 2018]. Nevertheless, it is used marginally in rural areas of many countries and it is replaced by other tools, which are similar to its concept [Soligno et al., 2015; Dias, 2018].

In the case of Poland, many competences involved in shaping the SRD have been taken over by regional self-governments, which is also reflected in their developmental strategies. Through their activities (based on subsidiarity), these self-governments may support local self-governments (municipalities) in the areas that are crucial from their viewpoint. One of the areas of such activities is the provision of support for local communities in the form of grant programs that are based on the participation of the residents, which are supposed to activate them and increase their public participation. An example of such programs consists of the implemented “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” [Bednarska-Olejniczak et al., 2021]. They constitute a supplementation of the solutions already functioning at the local level, which are also based on participation of the residents [Feltynowski and Rzeńca, 2019].

Thus, this article discusses the possibilities for regional governments to use the public-participation tool of providing grants (based on participation processes of the residents) for small local communities in rural areas. This article results from the fact that there is no other research on similar solutions in the literature. This topic also seems significant from the viewpoint of including such solutions into the strategies of self-government regions not only in Poland. Among others, this article analyzes the extent to which the examined solution may contribute to supporting the SRD, as well as supporting the achievement of the SDGs. The subjects of research consist of Polish regional self-governments, with particular emphasis on the self-government of the Opolskie Region and the “Marszałkowska Inicjatywa Sołecka” (MIS) program, implemented in this region in the years 2019–2022. As a result, the following research questions were put forward:

RQ1: To what extent have the Polish regional self-governments taken into account the participation of residents in their development strategies in the context of the SRD?

RQ2: Are the goals formulated for the program—chosen as the case study—consistent with the SDGs, despite the fact that they were defined before the creation of the SDGs?

RQ3: Is it possible for the program grants to serve as a bottom-up diagnosis tool for necessary activities aimed at supporting the achievement of individual SDGs in rural areas?

The above-mentioned analysis constitutes a contribution to the discussion on the possibility and methods for including the regional self-governments and local communities in supporting the achievement of the SDGs. In addition to analyzing the participation tool and explaining the conditions and possible effects of its use, it also helps determine the possibilities and limitations of the inclusion of the residents’ participation processes in the activities of regional self-governments.

The following structure of the article has been adopted: the first section discusses the evolution of the SRD concept based on literature studies, as well as the role of regional and local self-governments in achieving the SDGs, and the significance of public participation in achieving the SDGs; the second section includes the research design and methods; the third section presents the research results; the fourth section

consists of the discussion; and the fifth section includes the conclusions along with the indication of the limitations of the research and further activities.

2 Participation in the context of the SRD

The concept of sustainable development was originally determined in the second half of the 20th century. In the course of the following years, the sustainable development concept became one of the essential determinants of development policies formulated around the world [Stafford-Smith et al., 2017]. It was the basis for the establishment of the Agenda, Millennium Development Goals, Agenda 2030, and the SDGs [Global Taskforce, 2016]. Although the Agenda 21 has already indicated “that national strategies be developed to address economic, social and environmental aspects of sustainable development,” its main area of interest and impact were the environmental aspects of sustainable development [Bednarska-Olejniczak et al., 2019]. 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 17 SDGs [Global Taskforce, 2016]. Next, in 2018, a document called “Delivering the Sustainable Development Goals at local and regional level” was created [European Commission, 2018]. It was indicated in this document that the local and regional authorities play an important role in implementing the Agenda 2030 and the SDG objectives and targets.

It is also indicated in many scientific publications that individual SDGs cannot be achieved without the engagement of regional and local authorities [Graute, 2016; Jones and Comfort, 2020]. From the viewpoint of this article, it should be noted that in practice, there has been a visible increase in the activities of regional self-governments toward this goal [Bardal et al., 2021]. This results from the fact that as part of the intraregional policy, the subnational governments are able to (among others) “use the development potential of each area, in order to stimulate a progressive adjustment of the local economic system to the changing economic environment” [Pike et al., 2016, p. 24]. They have the possibility to impact (stimulate, support) the bottom-up processes, as well as the activities aimed at supporting the regional development [Thierstein and Walser, 1999].

The approach regarding rural development has evolved over time in individual countries, and it has been usually associated with changes in the main trends of development theory [OECD, 2016]. It can be observed that there has been a gradual transition, first from the development aimed at modernizing agriculture and the associated improvement in agricultural-production efficiency that led to improved quality of life, meeting the basic needs, as well as establishing ecological balance, to later the development of local communities and the focus on equality and sustainable development [Murdoch, 1993; Shepherd, 1998; OECD, 2016, p. 67]. As indicated by Knickel and Renting [2000]: “rural development consists of a wide variety of multi-dimensional and integrated activities that fulfil a number of functions not just for the farm, but also for the region and the society as a whole.” In the IFAD’s report, it was noted that it is a component (and an achievement stage) of the broader processes of changes in rural areas. In accordance with the definition adopted therein, rural development is “the process of improving the opportunities and well-being of rural people. It is a process of change in the characteristics of rural societies. In addition to agricultural development, it involves human development and social and environment objectives, as opposed to just economic ones” [IFAD, 2016, p. 24]. Furthermore, the above-mentioned report prepared by IFAD also indicates significant changes in approach to the issue of (sustainable) development in rural areas, which resulted from the adoption of Agenda 2030. On the other hand, while having in mind that SRD applies not only to agriculture, but includes all three pillars of the SDGs, it may be assumed that rural development will fit into the implementation of most or even all of the 17 goals [UNDESA, 2021].

2.1 Public participation in rural areas

From the viewpoint of the topic of this article, it is necessary to note that the analyzed publications devoted to SRD also discuss the subject of the widely understood participation of the residents. The analysis of

occurrence of the participat* (118) phrase indicates that it is used most often, either independently (20), or in the form of “community participation” (15) or “participatory (action) research” (10). The area of participation discussed in the literature is significantly diversified, which to a large extent results from the multiple possibilities of using engagement of the local community to achieve the goals of sustainable development and its very extensive meaning.

The public-participation concept itself has received a lot of attention in literature. Usually, the works of such authors as Arnstein [1969], Langton [1978], and Connor [1988] are used as a points of reference. The general idea of public participation is to include the residents in the co-decision processes concerning those matters that affect them. However, the degree of inclusion depends on the tools and processes proposed by the authorities. In practice, the effect expected by the residents, in the form of better adaptation of public services to the needs reported by the residents, is also very often emphasized [e.g., Boulding and Wampler, 2010]. Some of the researchers note the imperfections and shortcomings of the participation mechanisms [e.g., McNulty, 2015; Manes-Rossi et al., 2023].

The above-mentioned idea of citizen participation in the activities of public authorities is associated with the good governance concept, in which active engagement of residents in the decision-making processes plays a crucial role [Lawton and Macaulay, 2014]. The target 16.7 of the SDGs directly relates to it (aims to “ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels”). One of the participation forms, which has been permanently adopted in many countries, is the PB. While looking for the tools allowing to accelerate the achievement of SDGs, UN-HABITAT carried out an analysis of PB’s impact on the achievement of the SDG targets. The starting point was an indication that the PB has proved its usefulness as a tool supporting local development. On the basis of PB analysis, it was shown in the above-mentioned report that in many countries it particularly contributes to the implementation of the different SDG targets [UN-Habitat, 2020]. Nevertheless—as mentioned in the introduction—in many countries, it is used marginally in rural areas and it has been replaced by other tools, which are similar to its concept.

3 Design and research methodology

Due to the complexity of the issue, as well as the lack of other studies on it, this study utilizes a qualitative, case study-based approach. The approach is supported by the analysis of literature and source documents. The matter determining the research procedure was noticing (after analysis of the websites of individual regions) that 11 out of 16 regional self-governments in Poland use—as part of the practice to support rural development—different forms of grants dedicated to small rural local communities. One of the main objectives in the scope of granting these funds is the activation of local communities, as well as increasing the level of public participation of the residents. The common feature of these tools is the necessity to include the local community members in the process of planning, selecting, and implementing a task financed with the use of a given grant. Therefore, the following question emerged: Are regions consciously using these tools while having the SRD in mind? And if so, to what extent do the above-mentioned activities correspond to it? The first research stage consisted of the above-mentioned literature studies concerning the sustainable development (including rural areas), the inclusion of regional and local self-governments in the processes of achieving the SDGs, as well as the place of public participation in sustainable development.

The research confirmed the possibility of the inclusion of public participation in the activities aimed at the SRD. An analysis of the development strategy contents of each of the 11 regions (applicable until 2020) was carried out, in order to establish the connection between the above-mentioned tools and the development strategies of the individual regions. Limitation of the time range resulted from the dates of commencement of the grant programs (2016–2019), as well as from validity periods of the strategies (until 2020). As it may be noticed, these strategies were developed prior to the establishment of the SDGs. The content analysis of each strategy verified inclusion of the following elements in them: firstly—SRD; secondly—public participation; and thirdly—public participation as a tool supporting the SRD (RQ1). On the basis of the results of this analysis, it was found that the only region that directly indicated the necessity to use public participation in supporting the SRD was the Opolskie region. It meant that this was the only

region that directly fit into the SDG target 16.7 in this scope. As a result, the program implemented in this region was determined as the case study for further analysis. The subsequent research stage consisted of the analysis of regulations applicable to the examined project concerning: project's purpose, types of financed tasks, financing conditions, and selection and implementation procedures of individual tasks. Subsequently, an analysis was carried out as to the types of tasks submitted for financing, based on the donor's 2020–2022 project database. The implemented analyses allowed to determine the SDG targets, which are associated with individual thematic areas of financing and with specific tasks proposed for implementation by the residents (RQ2 and RQ3).

4 Research results

As part of the undertaken measures, resulting from the adopted regional development strategies that take into account the concept of sustainable development, the Polish regional self-governments may use the tools based on public participation of the local residents, in the process of deciding about the selection of public goods and services, which are supposed to be provided to the local community [Węglarz, 2018; Poplawski and Gawłowski, 2019; Bednarska-Olejniczak et al., 2020, 2021]. Among others, the above-mentioned tools include: PB, rural development programs, village fund/*fundusz sołecki* (FS), and grants for small local communities in rural areas granted from the budgets of regional self-governments, which are the subject of this article.

4.1 Analysis of the public participation's significance in the development strategies of Polish regions in the context of SRD and grant programs that activate small local communities

In order to get an answer to RQ1, an analysis was carried out concerning the content of the development strategies of provincial (regional) self-governments applicable until 2020, under which the grant programs for *sołectwos* were introduced. As given earlier, it was based on the analysis of three areas: firstly—SRD; secondly—public participation; and thirdly—public participation as a tool of sustainable development of rural areas. In addition, an assessment was conducted regarding the compliance of each of the grant systems, proposed by individual regions, with the area of public participation indicated in individual strategies. All 11 regions included public participation processes in their development strategy (until 2020). Also, in the case of each region, the subsidy program for villages is in line with the area of public participation in the regional development strategy. More synthetic results of the analysis are presented in Table 1.

On the basis of the results of this analysis, it was found that the only region that directly indicated the necessity to use public participation in supporting the SRD was the Opolskie region. It meant that this was the only region that directly fit into the SDG target 16.7 in this scope. As a result, the MIS program implemented in this region was determined as the case study for further analysis.

4.2 Context

The Opolskie region is located in the south-western part of Poland. In 2020, rural areas of the Opolskie region were inhabited by 46.9% of its 1 million total population. The residents of this region are characterized by high social activity, which manifests itself (among others) as bottom-up informal measures implemented for the benefit of their places of residence. High social activity of the residents is reflected (among others) by increasing implementation indicators of the strategic goal entitled “Active regional community,” contained in the Development Strategy of the Opolskie Region 2020 (change 2019–2010). A significant instrument used to stimulate local communities is the Rural Renewal Program, which has been implemented since 1997 and which is the largest as well as the longest regional program for activating local communities in Poland. Currently, the Rural Renewal Program is participated by approximately 60% of the Opolskie *sołectwos*. [Płatkowska-Prokopczyk, 2019].

Table 1. Synthetic results of the analysis of the public participation's significance in the development strategies of Polish regions (scope and level of inclusion)

<i>Region: Donośląskie Project: "Odnowa Dolnośląskiej Wsi"</i> <i>Scope:</i> strengthening of the civil society. <i>How: Directly, by indication of the action directions (among others):</i> improvement of the standard of living of the rural population, transformation of the agrarian structure, development of nonagricultural activity of the residents of rural areas
<i>Region: Łódzkie Project: "Dotacje dla gmin—projekty w sołectwach"</i> <i>Scope:</i> active civil society <i>How: Indirectly, the lack of direct inclusion in the strategy. Indirectly included in the following strategic goal: "Rural areas attractive in terms of settlement, which use internal potentials for multifunctional development"</i>
<i>Region: Małopolskie Project: "Małopolska Wieś"</i> <i>Scope:</i> shaping and developing the civic activity, as well as strengthening of social capital and economic development of rural areas <i>How: Directly, by indication of the action directions (among others):</i> rational use of natural resources, preservation of animate and inanimate nature in an unchanged state, maintaining the stability of ecosystems and ecological processes, and preservation of biological diversity
<i>Region: Mazowieckie Project: "Mazowiecki Instrument Aktywizacji Sołectw Mazowsze"</i> <i>Scope:</i> development of civil society as well as social capital <i>How: Indirectly, the strategy indicates the action direction called "Multifunctional development of rural areas". It is compliant with the implementation of activities aimed at SRD, while taking into account the economic aspects in connection with the social and environmental ones</i>
<i>Region: Opolskie Project: "MIS Marszałkowska Inicjatywa Sołecka"</i> <i>Scope:</i> supporting the development of civil society <i>How: Directly, while taking into account public participation:</i> the strategy emphasized that the implementation of actions aimed at multifunctional development of rural areas, among others by provision of an opportunity to implement bottom-up initiatives, compliant with the local development strategies, aimed at sustainable development of the Opolskie rural areas, as well as favorable structural changes, constituted the basis for making rural areas an attractive place to live, rest, and run a business activity. In this scope, the strategic direction consisted of striving to integrate local communities, which are the most important potential of the Opolskie rural areas.
<i>Region: Podlaskie Project: "Program Odnowy Wsi"</i> <i>Scope:</i> social capital as a catalyst for development processes, including: improvement of social and civic competences of the region's residents <i>How: Indirectly, the operational goal called "Environmental protection and rational management of environmental resources" took into account the issues of sustainable waste management, also in rural areas, associated with agricultural production.</i>
<i>Region: Pomorskie Project: "Aktywne Sołectwo Pomorskie"</i> <i>Scope:</i> high level of social capital/improvement of the regional cultural and civic community <i>How: Indirectly, general principle of sustainable development—it was assumed that achievement of a sustained improvement in the standard of living of the residents requires the development implemented while ensuring social, ecological, and spatial balance.</i>
<i>Region: Śląskie Project: "Inicjatywa Sołecka"</i> <i>Scope:</i> Silesia province as a region characterized by high quality of life, based on universal access to high-standard public services <i>How: Directly, among others the following action directions were indicated:</i> sustainable increase in productivity and competitiveness of the agri-food sector, rational management of the water resources, reduction of consumption of the environmental resources and energy, and environmental education.
<i>Region: Warmińsko-Mazurskie Project: "Małe Granty Sołeckie"</i> <i>Scope:</i> Improvement of social activity as a result of the development of social capital, as well as an increase in the availability and quality of public services <i>How: Directly, the strategic area called "Modern village" was indicated. The effects associated with SRD, e.g., increased specialization in the scope of production of high-quality food based on regional natural resources, aimed at supporting the income level of the region's residents.</i>

Continued

Table 1. Continued

<i>Region: Wielkopolskie—Pięknienie Wielkopolska Wieś</i>
<i>Scope:</i> Building a social capital for the benefit of civil society
<i>How:</i> Indirectly, the action directions of activities may be found in the horizontal objective entitled “Sustainable development.”
<i>Region: Zachodniopomorskie Project: “Granty Sołeckie”</i>
<i>Scope:</i> Increase in the identity and social cohesion of the region, including support in the scope of civil society development
<i>How:</i> Directly, the mission included the following references (among others): activation of rural areas aimed at their multifunctional development, as well as increase in the efficiency and competitiveness of agriculture, activities aimed at improvement of the living conditions of local communities, and support in the scope of development of the local democracy and civil society.

Source: own elaboration.

SRD, sustainable rural development.

The primary instruments used to activate the local communities in rural areas in Poland include: FS, village renewal programs, and activities in the scope of community-led local development [Sokolowska and Szwiec, 2016]. The main activities are usually implemented at the local level with the participation of local authorities—differently to the discussed program. Furthermore, the scale of financing in the case of the MIS is several times smaller. Therefore, it constitutes an instrument that complements the above-mentioned forms. It is necessary to note that the MIS program is characterized by a low barrier to entry, due to the fact that each *sołectwo* has guaranteed access to one grant during the program and due to the low required own contributions (which can be paid using the municipality’s funds).

4.3 Case study of the MIS

The MIS project consists of providing financial aid (Table 2), in the form of a targeted (conditional) grant from the budget of the regional Self-government of the Opolskie Region (SWO) to the municipality’s budget, granted for cofinancing of the municipality’s own tasks in the scope of small local projects, implemented in rural areas in individual *sołectwa* or groups of *sołectwa* (*sołectwo*—this usually covers one village). The MIS’s declared goal is to enable small communities to receive the funds for their ongoing and/or investment projects and tasks, aimed at their support and promotion, as well as development, integration, and activation. As it may be noticed, this assumption corresponds to the target 16.7 of the SDGs. In particular, the activities determined in the MIS’s regulations include (with potential links of tasks types proposed by the residents and the SDG targets):

- a) free-of-charge activities that serve the local community and increase social activity and integration of the residents (SDG 10.2, 10.3, 11.3, 16.7 targets);
- b) development of public places in a given *sołectwo*, which are important for the common good of the residents (SDG 6.2, 11.7 targets);
- c) activities in the scope of improvement of the residents’ safety (SDG 3.6 target);
- d) activities that support the idea of strengthening the regional identity (SDG 11.3, 11.4, 16.7 targets);
- e) activities in the scope of improvement of access to the sector of culture, tourism, recreation, art, protection of cultural goods as well as national heritage, etc. (SDG 8.9, 9.1, 11.4 targets);
- f) participation in the events (e.g. sports, cultural events) (SDG 10.2, 10.3, 11.3, 16.7 targets);
- g) creation of conditions for the development and improvement of attractiveness in the scope of tourism, sightseeing, and sport in a given *sołectwo* (SDG 8.9, 9.1 targets).

Procedure for obtaining this type of support consists of several stages:

- a) during the village meeting, the village residents submit the proposal of “tasks” for implementation and discuss the selection of one of them. The result should be a resolution passed by the residents, which determines the selection of a given task;
- b) documentation (resolution and description) is submitted by a representative of the residents (village administrator) to the office of the municipality, in which a given village is located. The municipality—in cooperation with the representatives of the residents—annually selects the tasks from among the documents submitted by the *sołectwa*, for which the municipality will submit an application to the SWO (municipal offices act as an intermediary and coordinator for all *sołectwos* in their area);
- c) the SWO verifies the applications, especially by analyzing compliance of the proposed activities with the project goals, and makes a decision about the granting of funds;
- d) the funds for individual tasks are transferred to the municipality, which supervises the task implementation;
- e) the contractor implements a given investment, with the possibility of support in the scope of its implementation provided by the local community.

As it may be noticed, the participation of residents in the process is not limited only to the expression of opinion during voting. On the one hand, the discussion stage (during which they may submit ideas and exchange views) is important, and on the other hand, the stage of project implementation itself, in which they can actively participate, is also significant. Table 3 includes information about individual types of tasks financed from the grants in subsequent editions of the MIS.

Table 2. The primary instruments used to activate the local communities in rural areas vs. MIS

FS	Rural Renewal Program	MIS
Form: allocated funds in the municipality's budget	Form: (barrier to entry) a long-term program that offers various forms of support. Access to them depends on the status of a given <i>sołectwo</i> (beginner participant, participant, advanced participant, leader, passive participant)	Form: 3-year program; targeted grant from the region's budget for cofinancing of the municipalities' own tasks in the implementation of small local projects
Barrier of entry: consent of the municipality to allocate a fund and to finance the tasks.	Long-term engagement of a given <i>sołectwo</i> in the activities (strategic, long-term nature)	Annual initiatives, maximum one-third of municipalities' <i>sołectwo</i> each year.
Annual task-oriented nature.	The maximum amount for one <i>sołectwo</i> : determined in the form of individual competitions.	The maximum amount for one <i>sołectwo</i> : 5,000 PLN
The maximum amount for one <i>sołectwo</i> : depends on the municipality's decision	Own contribution: depending on a given competition	Own contribution: required, at least 20% of the costs
Own contribution: own funds of the municipality granted discretionary to a given <i>sołectwo</i>	Requirements: among others the functioning of a leader and at least a 5-person group of village renewal or association, development and adoption of a village renewal plan by the village meeting, and then its updating and implementation.	Requirements: Task for implementation selected at a village meeting in the form of a resolution. A given <i>sołectwo</i> may use the grant once during the program's duration.
Requirements: Task for implementation selected at a village meeting in the form of a resolution.		

Source: own elaboration.

FS, fundusz sołecki; MIS, Marszałkowska Inicjatywa Sołecka.

Table 3. Structure of the financed projects according to the spending effect

	2020	2021	2022
Number of municipalities	68	68	68
Types of projects:			
Rural common rooms: renovation, additional equipment, land development	112	118	83
Public places (including: gazebos, sheds, sports fields, outdoor gyms, roads, pavements, development of squares, and sanitary facilities)	66	106	91
Playgrounds	46	61	57
Purchase of equipment	34	36	80
Fire brigade	14	12	24
Others (including events)	74	23	18

Source: own elaboration based on Opolskie region data.

5 Discussion

This article discusses the possibilities of regional self-governments to use the public participation tool in the form of conditional grants (based on the residents' participation processes) for small local communities in rural areas. This article resulted from the lack of research concerning similar solutions in the literature, as well as the fact that Polish regional self-governments have been using such solutions since 2016. The literature analysis indicated that participation processes are very often considered to be the accelerators for achieving the SDG targets (especially in the scope of PB). During the subsequent stage, the point of reference consisted of the earlier observation that regional self-governments in Poland began to gradually introduce grant programs (based on the public participation mechanism) for small rural communities. The justification for their introduction usually consisted of the improvement of living conditions and the activation of residents in the scope of their inclusion in codecisions regarding local matters [Bednarska-Olejniczak et al., 2021]. As a result, a question emerged as to the extent to which regions identified the need to strengthen civil society and public participation level in their strategies, particularly in rural areas. On the other hand, despite the fact that development strategies were framed before 2015, they should undoubtedly relate to sustainable development, including SRD, in the context of previously determined MDGs. Therefore, the first research step consisted of analyzing the degree and scope of the inclusion of two issues in the regional development strategies (until 2020): SRD and public participation. This constituted a search for an answer to RQ1. The research covered only those regions, in which the grants for *sołectwos* that constituted a tool for supporting public participation in rural areas were implemented by 2020.

On the basis of the results of the analysis, it was observed that the goals or postulated directions of activities, associated with the SRD, were present in all development strategies—directly (via use of the “sustainable rural development” phrase) or indirectly (via indicated directions of activities for the entire region). The proposed directions of activities most often referred to the multifunctional development of rural areas, and especially to agricultural activity—this scope definitely dominated in the strategies, protection, and rational use of natural resources, sustainable waste management, support for activities implemented in the areas with unfavorable conditions, modernization and development of technical infrastructure, development of nonagricultural activities of the rural residents, building of identity of a given region, protection of heritage, and support for traditional products.

While answering RQ1, it is necessary to note that the inclusion of public participation in the catalog of activities associated with the achievement of SRD took place in only 3 out of the 11 analyzed strategies. In the case of the Wielkopolska region, it took the form of “co-participation principle,” i.e., engagement of all participants of the socio-economic life of the region; however, it generally applied to the whole region—therefore implicitly also to the rural areas. In the case of the Zachodniopomorskie region, the postulate of sustainable development included (among others) the support for development of local democracy and civil society; however, also not only in relation to the rural areas, but the whole region. The only one

dedicated exclusively to villages, and at the same time the most developed example of the inclusion of public participation in activities associated with SRD, was the case of the Opolskie region. One of its strategic goals consisted of shaping an active regional community. On the one hand, this goal resulted from treating the cooperation and activity of the residents as a source of potential competitive advantage of the region, and on the other hand—as an opportunity to counteract depopulation. Furthermore, this strategy emphasized that the region was distinguished by self-organization and social activity in rural areas, therefore it is necessary to stimulate activity in the third sector and to support bottom-up initiatives in this scope. As part of the developmental challenges indicated in the strategy, it was directly stated that enabling the implementation of bottom-up initiatives, which are compliant with the local development strategies, aimed at sustainable development of the Opolskie rural areas and beneficial structural changes, constitutes the basis for making rural areas an attractive place to live, rest, and run business activity. It is necessary to strive to integrate the local communities, which constitute the most important potential of the Opolskie rural areas.

Regardless of the above-mentioned public participation, which was placed in the context of SRD, it also emerged in all researched regional development strategies—at the level of strategic goals or operational goals. In the general scope, it was primarily focused on shaping the civil society and strengthening of social capital. Increasing the availability and quality of public services was indicated less frequently (only in the case of two regions) as its main goal. The following components were indicated as specific directions of activities (among others): activation and development of local communities, shaping and strengthening of the regional identity, stimulation of the rural area development aimed at increasing the participation of local communities in this process, enabling the implementation of bottom-up initiatives compliant with the local development strategies, implementation of the instruments that support participation of residents in decision-making processes at the local and regional level, and development of the governance concept. Therefore, while taking into account the nature of the grant programs for *sołectwos*, it may be concluded that they were compliant with the area of public participation included in the regional development strategies in the case of all researched regions. Furthermore, as a result of the above-mentioned analysis, an outlier case was distinguished, i.e., the only region that took into account public participation in rural areas, as a factor supporting the achievement of sustainable development, in its development strategy.

Subsequent analysis was conducted for the MIS program implemented in this region. It was assumed that this program should coherently reflect the provisions of the region's strategy and it should support its implementation. It is necessary to remember that in the case of the Opolskie region, the significant factors of the adopted solutions, as well as the program's success are due to the high activity of local communities in the name of public participation in the previous years. This means that the local communities in this area had high social competences and they were involved in various types of participatory processes. At this point, it is also necessary to refer to the differences between the implemented programs, which could have influence on the high popularity of the MIS and on activation of the local communities. The advantage of the MIS program consisted of the low barriers in obtaining the financing. The primary limitations (that cannot be called barriers, due to the relatively easy fulfilment of the conditions) include: the need to involve residents in the process and the need to ensure 20% of own contributions (from the municipality's funds). As indicated above, the first limitation was not significant due to social competences of the residents, while the latter usually meant the need to change the allocation of a small part of the funds, which were supposed to be spent anyway on similar needs of the local community (especially the funds from the FS, which were due to this community). It is necessary to note that in both cases (FS and MIS), the spending directions are determined by the residents and they usually include similar areas of spending.

Comparison of the MIS's main goals with the SDG targets allowed to match them to the eight targets. It is necessary to note that the achievement of sustainable development should be approached in a holistic manner, because in many areas there is a combination or interdependence of activities under various SDG targets. The literature includes in-depth analyses of the coexistence of various groups of goals within one type of activity [Weitz et al., 2018]. Obviously, in the analyzed case, the starting point consisted of the above-mentioned connection of the program with the SDG target 16.7. The analyzed program did not include any SDG targets directly related to agriculture (agricultural production). The emphasis was placed on community integration, as well as tasks increasing the level of life quality. This may result from the

observation that in the case of rural areas, there are differences in the local infrastructure, compared to urban areas. This is one of the most emphasized areas in the literature, which needs to be supported as part of striving to achieve the SDGs [Mihai and Iatu, 2020, p. 11]. Therefore, while answering RQ2, it may be concluded that the program targets largely corresponded to the selected SDG targets. It should be noted that a large part of the SDG targets associated with PB, indicated by UN-Habitat, was reflected in the program goals (except for 4.7, 5b and 7.1), and at the same time it was possible to find a group of goals specific for a given program. This shows the need to consider the context when determining those SDG targets that can be supported with the use of a given process or instrument.

The last research question concerns the possibility to use the program as a tool for bottom-up diagnosis of the necessary actions, which serve the purpose of achieving individual SDG goals in rural areas. The method and scope of data collection from the whole process seems to be an important issue here. Firstly—the residents may submit and discuss various ideas (which must be recorded) during village meetings. Secondly—the criteria for subjects of the proposed projects are relatively general in the regulations. Therefore, it can be concluded that a bottom-up diagnosis of this kind is possible. Nevertheless, doubts are raised by the level of awareness among residents in the scope of the sustainable development concept, which may translate into proposals that are not conducive to accelerating the achievement of the SDGs.

The analysis concerning the directions of expenses proposed by the residents (Table 3) demonstrated that they were primarily focused on the expenses aimed at ensuring the conditions for integration of the local community. Nevertheless, by placing these expenses in the context of the program goals and the SDG targets, it may be concluded that some of them largely fit into the individual goals. A detailed analysis demonstrates that the residents themselves were able to identify the problem areas—mainly the ones associated with the infrastructure ensuring safety, protection and management of green areas, creation of generally accessible and user-friendly public spaces, or protection of cultural heritage. While having in mind the reasons for using community participation indicated in the literature [Abatena, 1997]: “to facilitate appropriate problem diagnosis and proper needs assessment; to enhance the process of feasible decision making; and to expedite the process of effective program design and implementation,” it seems justifiable to conclude that this program may be also used as a tool for supporting the bottom-up diagnosis procedure, in the scope of desired activities supporting the achievement of SDGs in these areas (RQ3). As it was previously noted, not only the submitted projects themselves may turn out to be valuable, but also (or perhaps most of all) the stenographic records of the residents’ discussions from village meetings, as well as consultations of the residents’ representatives with municipal authorities. Analysis of the above-mentioned materials may allow to identify the problem areas that are recurring in many rural communities, while the information about them could not be obtained in any other way. This results from the greater freedom of discussion and expression of the residents during meetings without the participation of third parties (only the members of a given local community, who usually know each other and as a result may freely discuss difficult topics). Furthermore, it is also necessary to mention a problem that may arise in a part of the communities, where some residents—for various reasons—will not want to or will not be able to participate in the village meeting. The above-mentioned analysis of the research results allows to conclude that also from a practical viewpoint, public participation in rural areas may constitute support in the scope of achieving the SDGs.

6 Conclusions

While analyzing the research results, we are able to conclude that the answers to most of the research questions put forward in this article may be considered as positive. Firstly—the initial literature research, the results of the content analysis of the development strategy for the Opolskie region, the assumptions and goals of the MIS program, as well as the results of its implementation, indicate the undoubted usefulness of this form of public participation in the scope of supporting the group of the SDG targets, identified in this article and associated with the SRD. Secondly—an in-depth analysis of the development strategies of

all regions, which have introduced similar programs, has demonstrated that public participation is one of the areas taken into account by the regions. Nevertheless, in this case, only a part of self-governments assigned it directly to rural areas. Furthermore, when it comes to compliance of the goals set for the analyzed program with the SDGs, it may be unequivocally concluded—based on the performed analysis—that there is a compliance with at least 8 SDG targets, while 16.7 is the main SDG target. The answer to the last question, regarding the possibility to use the analyzed program as a tool for bottom-up diagnosis, also seems positive. However, it should be noted that in this case, it is necessary to meet several additional conditions.

On the one hand, the above-mentioned research results may constitute a reference point for other researchers, who would like to deepen the possibilities of using public participation in rural areas, while taking into account a different context. On the other hand, they may constitute the basis for practitioners, who develop subsequent regional development strategies (both in Poland and, primarily, in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe) in the scope of using public participation as a support for achieving the SDGs.

Obviously, the presented research has its limitations. Firstly, due to the pandemic, it was not possible to supplement the research with the use of in-depth interviews with the region's representatives, residents, and other participants of the process. This would make it possible to look at the analyzed process from the viewpoint of individual stakeholders, as well as to define the motives for participation in the program. Secondly, this research took into account the region characterized by one of the highest levels of the residents' social activity, as well as a high level of social competences. Thus, it means that a similar program could be met in other communities with passivity of the residents, which would put its purposefulness and usefulness into question.

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