

A Rural Revival – the Benefits of European Union Development Schemes for Rural Areas in the Region of Warmia and Mazury

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Introduction

Since the time of economic transformation, rural areas in Poland have been facing numerous hardships and problems, both social and economic. Those related to the economy, human resources, infrastructure and spatial aspects are the most apparent in those areas which are also devoid of many assets which could stimulate bottom-up development. The problem is very important, if only due to the fact that rural areas account for over 90% of the country and they are inhabited by nearly 40% of its population.

The socioeconomic transformation of Poland has brought about dramatic changes in the rural environment. The scope, pace and directions of the changes have varied depending on the location, local and regional factors which affect the changes and the natural and social and economic structures (Wójcik 2010). The Polish countryside is frequently perceived by society as a place with a level of technological, social and cultural development. Certain actions need to be taken to make the inhabitants of rural areas stop thinking in terms of what they should demand from the state and make some efforts to improve the integration and self-esteem of local communities.

1. Rural regeneration and revival

The economic processes associated with the system transformation have had an especially severe effect on the countryside of Warmia and Mazury. The restructuring of state-owned agricultural farms has resulted in unemployment rates reaching as much as 60% in some villages and communes. This has brought about a number of adverse economic and social effects, including impoverishment of the population and, consequently, entire communities. Furthermore, it has entailed dramatic reductions in consumption and welfare expenses. It was necessary to accumulate funds for improvement of technical infrastructure to enable development of new businesses and create new jobs.

The Polish countryside has enormous economic potential, but it can only be harnessed by the proper mobilisation of local communities, supported by local government and suitable financial support. Local communities need proper stimuli, good examples and practice to help them believe that the quality of life in rural areas can be improved. To do this, one should start at the lowest level of government.

When pursuing their goals and objectives, local governments aim at managing individual crisis situations. The projects that are carried out are to serve the purpose of stimulating local communities to take up joint enterprises to improve the conditions and quality of life in the country and create conditions for the development of the economic, social and cultural functions of the countryside.

The situation was unchanged before Poland's accession to the EU. Initially, rural inhabitants, organisations and self-governments regarded EU projects with reserve and mistrust, but that changed soon and now they are actively participating in preparing and filing applications for community aid, which is to contribute to development of their "little homelands".

The Warmia and Mazury countryside is an important part of the regional economy and it may become its driving force. The quality of life has improved since the 1990s and is constantly improving owing to the EU aid funds.

Contemporary socio-economic development of the rural areas largely depends on the capability for absorption of EU funds. Apart from the activity of local entities, pro-development effects of the funds depend on the trends of the regional policy (Silski 2000).

More and more attention is being devoted to regeneration of degraded rural areas. The phrase “regeneration of degraded rural areas” refers to adaptation of such areas to changing needs of local communities, living in the vicinity of (Kil, Nowak 2004), or in such areas. These areas are villages with fields owned by the villagers, where the issue of decapitalisation and related problems are very clearly visible. The main aim of regeneration is to bring an area out of the crisis state by eliminating the processes which resulted in its degradation (Kil, Gaziński 2004).

The concept of rural revival dates back to the late 19th century, when the development of industry and towns brought about a decline of rural areas and agriculture. People who lived in the country looked for jobs in town increasingly often and the gap between the country and towns increased rapidly. As a reaction to this, interest in rural area and folk culture grew, taking different forms, from the peasant-mania of artists of the Young Poland artistic movement, who saw the countryside as a place where national values and traditions are properly cultivated, to practical advice given by social activists who set up cooperatives, insurance, saving and lending institutions. However, the very phrase “rural revival” (German “Dorferneuerung”) was not formed until early 1960 in West Germany. Then, it denoted land enclosures and adaptation of rural infrastructure (roads, houses, farmsteads, sewerage and water supply systems) to the requirements of modern agriculture and to “urban” living conditions. However, such “rural revival” resulted in deterioration of the appearance of villages. From Germany, the movement spread to Austria in the 1970s. Here, especially in Lower Austria, care was taken to improve rural infrastructure, while at the same preserving the value of the rural landscape and architecture (Idziak).

Rural revival in Poland nowadays refers not only to the living conditions, but the social, spiritual and non-material aspects of villagers’ life are also strongly emphasised.

It is very strongly emphasised in the process of rural revival that a fundamental change is needed in the way people in the country think, from passive reception of externally-controlled processes to creative and organised actions, while assuming responsibility for one’s immediate surroundings and for the future of one’s community. This creates positive attitudes in rural communities, which generates grassroots initiatives, which result in overall improvement of competitiveness of the Polish countryside – not only in comparison with urban areas, but also with rural areas in other European countries (Wilczyński 2008).

Therefore, rural revival denotes not only preservation of the spatial arrangement of villages, renovation of buildings, investments in technical infrastructure, but it is also a “human revival” – a restoration of the identity of local communities, referring to regional culture and traditions.

According to Kłodziński (2007), rural revival is the people, their commitment, needs and resources that are in them and in their surroundings.

In light of this, the phrase “rural revival” becomes very similar to the term “regeneration”. Regeneration is a process whose aim is to revive degraded areas by restoring their original functions or by creating new ones. The process of regeneration is closely linked not only to building construction and to spatial planning, but also to economic and social policy. Successful completion of all the projects, especially those associated with social policy, stimulation of social initiative and awareness, will result in regaining and retaining the new functionality of the areas, preserving their aesthetic appearance, comfort of use and quality of

life. Villagers must feel that they are the driving force behind the development processes. They must be aware of their creativity and have a real influence on the surrounding area and the processes taking place in it.

2. Basic information about rural regeneration and revival, contained in the Sectoral Operational Programme “Restructuring and modernisation of the food production sector and rural development” (SPO ROL) and “Programme of Rural Development for 2007-2013” (PROW).

Structural transformations in agriculture, food production and sustainable development of rural areas posed one of the greatest challenges before Poland upon its accession to the EU. Community aid for Poland in the area was implemented in the years 2004-2006 within the Sectoral Operational Programme “Restructuring and Modernisation of the food production sector and rural development” (SPO ROL), whereas in the next programming period – within the “Rural development Programme for the years 2007-2013” (PROW). Table 1 shows the basic information on operational programmes SPO ROL and PROW in light of the assignments associated with rural development and revival.

Table 1. Basic information about rural revival and development, contained in SPO ROL and PROW.

Operational Programme	Sectoral Operational Programme Restructuring and modernisation of the food production sector and rural development	Operational Programme Rural development for years 2007-2013
Priority/Axis	Priority 2 Sustainable development of rural areas	Axis 3 Quality of life in rural areas and differentiation of rural economy
Action	Action 2.3 Rural development with preservation and protection of cultural heritage	313/322/323 Rural revival and development
Duration of the action	2004-2006	2007-2013
Beneficiaries (project developers)	Communes or cultural institutions organised by local self-government units	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • communes or cultural institutions organised by local self-government units, • church or other religious associations, • non-government organisation which is a public benefit organisation.
Maximum amount of subsidy (%)	80 % of eligible costs, however, not more than 450,000 PLN for one town/village - if beneficiaries in one town/village include the commune and a cultural institution, the level of subsidy for each cannot exceed 450,000 PLN during the programme implementation - if a project embraces two or more towns/villages, the project subsidy cannot exceed 450,000 PLN	75 % of eligible costs, the maximum subsidy for the project implementation in one town/village amounts to 500,000 PLN during the programme implementation.
Action budget – national / Province of Warmia and Mazury	112.5 million € / 5.62 million €	420.06 million € / 22.85 million €
Aim of the action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • improve the quality of life and work in rural areas, • improve the touristic attractiveness, • improve investment attractiveness, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • improvement of the quality of life and work in rural areas • satisfying social and cultural needs, • promotion of rural areas,

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • satisfy social and cultural needs, • develop identity of rural society and preserve cultural heritage. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • providing development opportunities to rural communities, • preservation of cultural heritage and specificity of rural areas • improvement of touristic and investment attractiveness of rural areas
Types of projects supported by the action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • investment in building construction, their adaptation or renovation, combined with modernisation and equipping of public facilities which perform cultural functions (day rooms, community centres, etc.), • investment in construction, renovation and equipping of playgrounds, sports facilities, bicycle lanes, walking tracks for public use, • investments and purchase of goods to be used in projects aimed at promotion of cultivation of local traditions and traditional professions, • renovation of village centres, making squares, parking spaces, pavements, street lighting, etc., • arranging greenery areas, parks and other leisure sites, • investment in construction or rebuilding of small touristic and recreational infrastructure, including systems of visual information, • development of water bodies within the town/village limits, • regeneration or adaptation combined with renovation of heritage buildings used for public purposes as well as restoration of local historical monuments and memorial sites, • purchase and renovation of buildings and structures which are typical of a rural area and their adaptation for public purposes, • pulling down dilapidated public buildings if it is not possible to renovate and continue using them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • investment in construction, rebuilding, renovation or equipping facilities which perform public, social, cultural, recreational and sport functions, • investments in construction, rebuilding, renovation or equipping facilities to be used in promotion of rural areas, including promotion and preservation of cultural heritage, tradition, art and culture, • investment in developing areas of public space, • investments in construction, renovation and rebuilding of infrastructure associated with development of touristic, sports, social or cultural functions, • purchase of facilities typical of the building traditions of the region, including heritage buildings to be used as public facilities, • investment in renovation, exhibiting or preservation of local historic monuments, heritage buildings or memorial sites, • investments in cultivation of local traditions and traditional professions

Prepared by the author based on: Rural Development Programme for the years 2007 – 2013 (PROW 2007-2013) and the Supplement SPO ROL.

3. Consumption of EU subsidies for renewal and regeneration of rural areas in Warmia and Mazury

The province of Warmia and Mazury is situated in the north-east of Poland and occupies an area of 24,173.17 km². It borders on the Russian Federation (The Kaliningrad Oblast), with a border length of 212 km. The major cities of the region include Olsztyn, Elbląg and Ełk. This is one of the most attractive parts of Poland due to its natural and touristic value. There are sandy beaches and bathing sites on clean lakes, beautiful forests, kayak and bicycle routes, as well as interesting architectural monuments.

The socioeconomic situation in the region became grave after the state-owned agricultural farms were liquidated. At that time, the European Community aid programmes provided great help in improving the situation. It is owing to them that the countryside is evolving, adopting to the new economic reality and providing employment to the residents,

while at the same time safeguarding the region's cultural, spiritual and material heritage. A variety of projects have mobilised local communities to take up joint initiatives to improve the living conditions in the country, to preserve the value of rural life and to create conditions for development of economic, social and cultural functions of the countryside.

Therefore, the subject of rural areas was particularly emphasised in the "Strategy of socioeconomic development of the Province of Warmia and Mazury until the year 2020", adopted by the regional council of the Province in July 2000 (and amended in August 2005). The wealth of the Warmia and Mazury region comes from three major branches of economic activity: agriculture and forestry, tourism and environmentally-friendly industry. Therefore, the development of rural areas occupies a horizontal place in the development strategy. The objectives and goals associated with the regional development coincide with the strategic goals of the state – that initiatives taken up in rural areas should be co-financed by aid funds of the European Union. It is in this regard that there are indefinite opportunities for support in the region of Warmia and Mazury.

Nowadays, due to the investment activities contained in the EU aid programmes, the "rural revival" is mistakenly understood to mean the same as the EU programmes, while in fact it denotes the ideas, methods and long-term and multi-phase development process, whose positive outcome will appear after a long period of time (Czapiewska, 2011).

Funds of over 20 million PLN were granted to the province of Warmia and Mazury in 2004-2006 within SPO ROL, Priority 2: Sustainable development of rural areas, Action 2.3: Rural revival and preservation and protection of cultural heritage. During that time, calls for applications were opened twice and there was a supplementary call for applications in 2007.

During the first call, 268 applications were filed with the Marshal's Office of the Province of Warmia and Mazury and the total amount applied for exceeded 39 million PLN. Out of the 100 rural and municipal communes, 83 communes and 7 cultural institutions filed their applications for subsidies, with beneficiaries including entities from 57 communes. A total of 139 subsidising agreements were signed for aid exceeding 20 million PLN, with:

- I call for applications: 97 contracts for the total amount of EU funds 16,622,285.00 PLN
- II call for applications: 27 contracts for the total amount of EU funds 3,350,475.00 PLN.

82 applications were filed during the third, supplementary, call for application, which resulted in signing 15 contracts for a total amount of 895,019.00 PLN of aid from EU funds.

Projects to be carried out included:

- creation and modernisation of greenery areas,
- development and renewal of village centres,
- construction, renovation and furnishing of community centres,
- construction and renovation of pavements and street lighting,
- construction and renovation of playgrounds, sports and leisure facilities,
- cultivation of local traditions.

The communes which carried out investment projects co-financed by EU funds within action 2.3, are shown in Fig. 1, whereas Table 2 shows examples of investment projects carried out in the Province of Warmia and Mazury.

The higher part of completed projects – 53% – are associated with cultural institutions. They are followed by projects associated with developing public spaces (21%), sports and leisure facilities (18%), greenery areas (6%), heritage sites (1%) and cultivation of the region's traditions (1%).

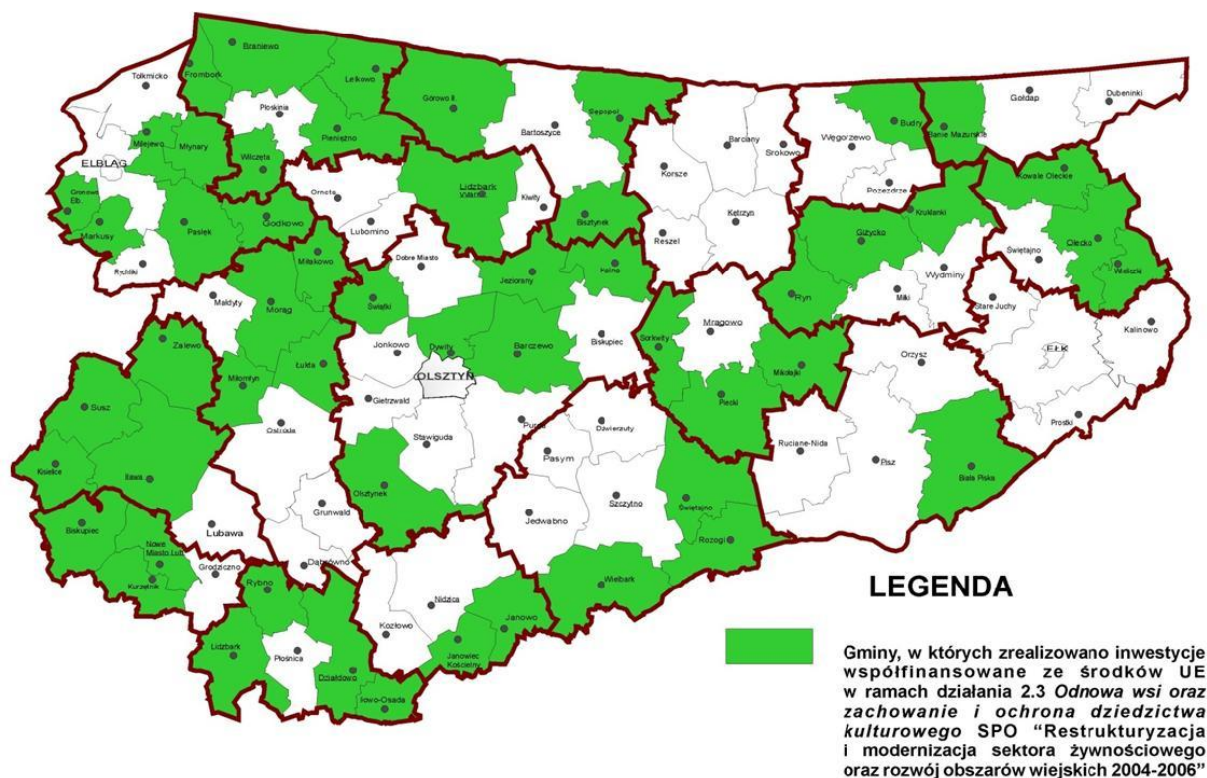


Fig. 1. The communes which carried out investment projects co-financed by EU funds within Action 2.3 Rural revival and preservation of cultural heritage.

Source: Cecot R. 2008b

Tab. 2. Examples of investment projects carried out in the Province of Warmia and Mazury within Action 2.3.

Commune	Village	Project name	Type of investment
Bisztynek	Bisztynek	Playground – a way of spending free time by children and adolescents in the commune of Bisztynek	Sports, leisure and tourist infrastructure, including systems of visual information
Pasłek	Drulity	Renovation and modernisation of the sports and leisure facility in the village of Drulity	Sports, leisure and tourist infrastructure, including systems of visual information
Godkowo	Podągi	Revival of the village of Podągi	Sports, leisure and tourist infrastructure, including systems of visual information
Nowe Miasto Lubawskie	Pacółtowo	Renovation and modernisation of the village common room in Pacółtowo	Construction, adaptation or renovation combined with modernisation or furnishing of public facilities which perform cultural functions
Świątki	Włodowo	Renovation, modernisation and furnishing the village common room in Włodowo	Construction, adaptation or renovation combined with modernisation or furnishing of public facilities which perform cultural functions
Lidzbark Warmiński	Pilnik	Renovation and expansion of the building of the community centre in the village Pilnik, Commune of Lidzbark Warmiński	Construction, adaptation or renovation combined with modernisation or furnishing of public facilities which perform cultural functions
Wilczęta	Stare Siedlisko	Revival of the community of Stare Siedlisko	Construction, adaptation or renovation combined with modernisation or furnishing of public facilities which perform cultural

			functions
Markusy	Stalewo	Renovation and modernisation as well as furnishing of the village common room in Stalewo	Construction, adaptation or renovation combined with modernisation or furnishing of public facilities which perform cultural functions
Kurzętnik	Małe Bałówki	Renovation and modernisation as well as furnishing of the village common room in Małe Bałówki	Construction, adaptation or renovation combined with modernisation or furnishing of public facilities which perform cultural functions
Biskupiec	Lipinki, Bielice	Developing of the village centre by making a pavement in Lipinki. Developing of the village centre by making a pavement in Bielice.	Developing village centres, arranging greenery areas, leisure facilities, developing water bodies
Banie Mazurskie	Banie Mazurskie	Modernisation of the street lighting in the village of Banie Mazurskie	Developing village centres, arranging greenery areas, leisure facilities, developing water bodies
Janowo	Janowo	Developing the market place in the village of Janowo	Developing village centres, arranging greenery areas, leisure facilities, developing water bodies
Janowiec Kościelny	Kuce	Modernisation of the stadium in the village of Kuce	Sports, leisure and tourist infrastructure, including systems of visual information
Rybno	Rybno	Developing a greenery area and leisure facilities – beach in Rybno	Sports, leisure and tourist infrastructure, including systems of visual information
Susz	Babięta Wielkie	Construction of the Village Sports Hall in the village of Babięta Wielkie	Developing village centres, arranging greenery areas, leisure facilities, developing water bodies
Budry	Więcki	Modernisation and renovation of the palace and park complex in the village of Więcki	Regeneration or adaptation of heritage buildings, used for public purposes, combined with their renovation

Prepared by the author based on: Cecot 2008a, Cecot 2008b

The Rural Development Programme for the years 2007-2013 was launched in Poland, including the province of Warmia and Mazury, in 2007. The programme offers the possibility of financing projects which involve the revival and development of rural areas.

The first call for applications was open from 02.02 to 31.03.2009. The funds available within the programme amounted to 52.7 million PLN. 137 applications were filed by different entities (94 by local government units, 27 by cultural institutions, 13 by churches and religious associations, 3 by non-government organisations), 118 of which were accepted. 117 agreements were signed for the total funds amounting to 36.9 million PLN. The number of agreements signed in individual communes is shown in Fig. 2. 19 of the agreements were for making “Orlik” sport fields. The “Moje Boisko – Orlik 2012 [My Sport Field – Orlik 2012]” programmes provides for making facilities which include sport fields, locker rooms and welfare facilities, which are open to the public and can be used free of charge. The aim of the Programme is to make modern sport facilities available to children and adolescents for them to have somewhere to practice sports.

To 2011, over 96% of projects from the first call have been carried out.

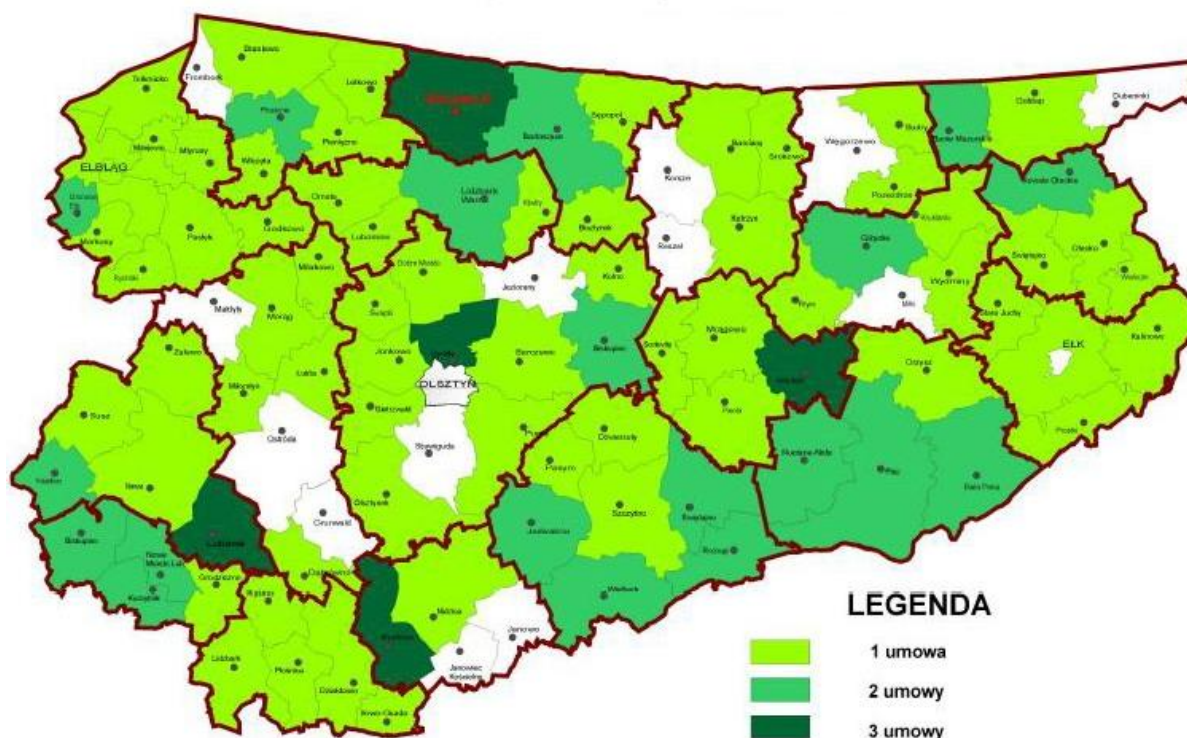


Fig. 2. The number of agreements signed in Communes within the I Call for Applications.
Source: Sarnowski J. 2009

The second call for applications was open from 17.05 to 31.05.2010 with the available funds amounting to 63.3 million PLN. The applicants' interest was much greater than in the first call, because 168 applications were filed, 151 of which were accepted. 151 agreements were signed for the total amount of funding of 47 million PLN. The number of agreements signed in communes following the second call for applications is shown in Fig. 3. 22 agreements in this edition were for the construction of "Orlik" sport fields.

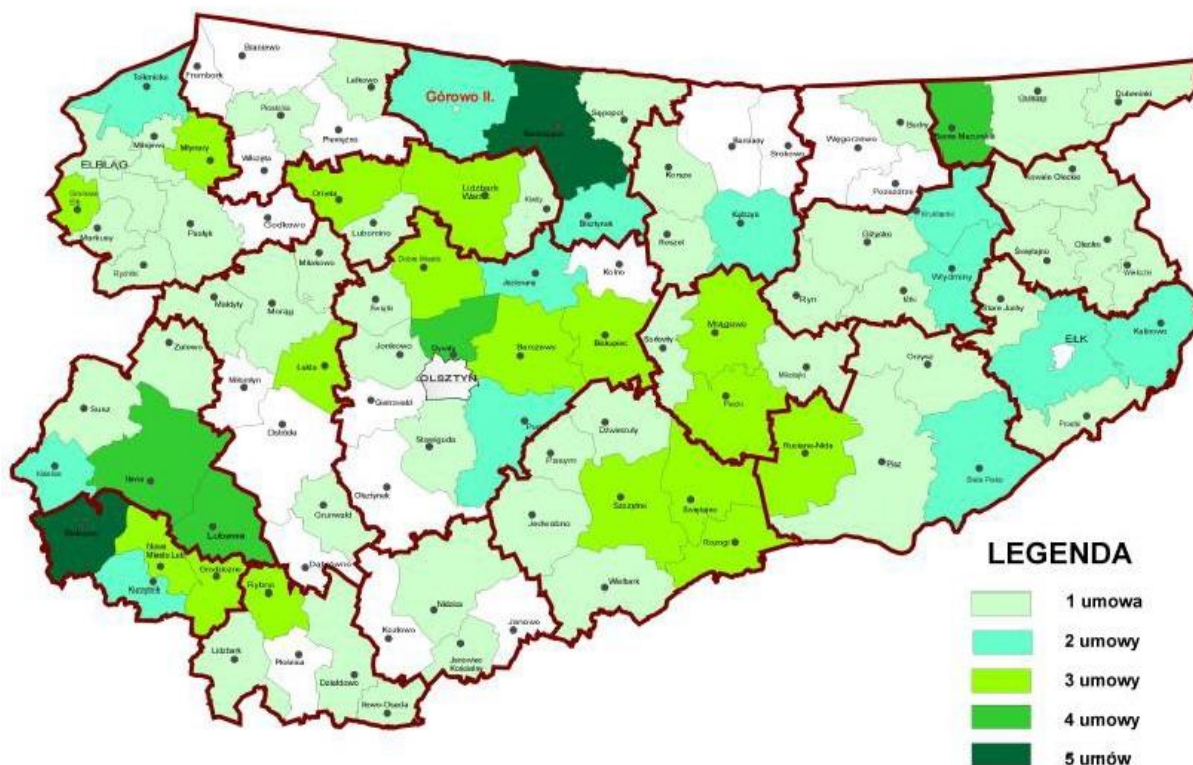


Fig. 3. The number of agreements signed in Communes within the action “Renewal and Development of Rural Areas, II Call for Applications.

Source: Sarnowski J. 2010

The third call for applications was open from 26.05 to 13.06.2011 with the available funds exceeding 39 million PLN. 121 applications were filed by different entities (80 by local government units, 7 by cultural institutions, 33 by churches and religious associations, 1 by a non-government organisation). The final results of the call are not known yet.

Summary

An analysis of utilisation of EU funds for renewal and development of rural areas has shown that they are very needed and properly used. Beneficiaries use this form of assistance increasingly often and the quality of their projects is getting better and better. More and more entities are becoming interested in material revival of rural areas, while at the same bearing in mind actions aimed to integrate local communities. The projects involving revival and development of the Mazurian countryside has led to a lot of valuable experience being gained and brought about mobilisation of villagers.

In numerous cases, a village revival has turned out to be a great antidote for the apathy and social pathologies and triggered development processes in areas away from the main areas of development. The renewal projects are unique and are based on the wealth and resources of the regions (Czapiewska 2011).

However, there are also projects which over-emphasize the physical aspects: improvement of the village appearance and its infrastructure, failing to attempt to win the community support for the project and make people aware of its necessity – thereby integrating village communities.

The countryside in the province of Warmia and Mazury is constantly changing its image. This is owed to a large extent to the project authors, who have shown a great ability to

utilise EU aid funds. Increasingly, a great number of villagers have accepted the need to find employment outside agriculture and find a suitable job, but people are also choosing the countryside as a place to live.

The situation of many Polish villages is difficult; this applies mainly to those which are situated in problematic areas; therefore, ways of improvement should be sought for them (Idziak 2003, Czapiewska 2010).

Owing to the generous offer of aid programmes aimed at farmers, they are also seeking new ways of developing their farms. Rural dwellers are integrating better and are increasingly taking independent and courageous actions to find new and effective sources of income outside agriculture and they are striving to make their villages better places to live.

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