



Subsidiarity in the service of regional policy: The perspective from Poland's West Pomerania region

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Olgierd Geblewicz

Abstract

Poland's local governments, introduced into the public administration system in two stages in 1989 and 1999, have become important actors in the development policy conducted at the national and local levels. Setting up voivodeships—the third-level units of local government—was particularly significant for building strong foundations for a comprehensive regional policy in Poland. Voivodeships create the conditions needed for the long-term economic and social development of their territories. That is why voivodeships should be governed by visionaries rather than administrators. The direct responsibility for regional development planning and programming positions their leaders as the coordinators of development activities in the region and the wise investors of EU funds. Their role must be reflected in the appropriate coordination of development activities at the local level and the ability to offer territorially sensitive financial tools to local communities.

Keywords

Poland, West Pomerania, Subsidiarity, Local government, Development, Regional policy

Introduction

Alongside the building of a democracy with a free-market economy in Poland over the last 30 years, the process of creating three levels of local government and reinforcing these by providing them with the necessary competences and resources has taken place. The scope of the tasks and responsibilities of the local governmental units varies depending on their level. The local governments closest to the citizens are liable for their basic

Corresponding author:

O. Geblewicz, West Pomerania Region, ul. Korsarzy 34, 70-540 Szczecin, Poland.
Email: marszalek@wzp.pl



needs, while the highest-level units of local government ensure the appropriate conditions for long-term economic and social development.

This article argues that there is often a tension between administrators and visionaries. It demonstrates how important it is that bureaucratic and visionary approaches complement and respect each other. The following sections describe the legal framework for Polish local-government activities at different levels and then look at West Pomerania's experience of providing solutions for collective action by local governments, especially through the use of territorial and inclusive instruments.

Towards strong and independent self-government in Poland

As early as the beginning of its transformation towards a market economy at the end of the 1980s, Poland created local governmental units on the scale of individual cities and communes. These entities of public administration, with their elected representative bodies and budget revenues, became important actors in the country's development policy. They gained power and the resources needed to satisfy the needs of local communities. However, these changes were not followed by solutions for the regional level, that is, the establishment of regional governments.

Poland's regional policy in the 1990s can be described as flawed, as it referred only to the government's policy towards voivodeships.¹ No other element, namely a regional authority elected by the inhabitants of the region, was considered necessary. The functions of such an authority were only partially performed by the voivode, who was the central government representative in the region. A fundamental change occurred from January 1999, when a comprehensive territorial reform, prepared in 1998, was implemented. As a result, the three-level territorial organisation of the state was introduced, within the framework of which *poviats*² and large voivodeships were established. Polish voivodeships correspond to the NUTS 2 level of European cohesion policy.³ The introduction of this framework made it possible to build the basis for the institutional set-up and instruments needed to implement European cohesion policy in Poland. At this administrative level, separate from the voivode, elected representative bodies—voivodeship governments—were established and voivodeship budgets were introduced. At the same time, many competences were transferred from the central level to the voivodeship level. The year 1999 marked the beginning of the existence of a comprehensive regional policy in Poland.

Another important change was related to Poland's accession to the EU in May 2004. As a result, the funds and solutions of the European cohesion policy became available to Poland. The first package of structural and cohesion funds, worth €8.4 billion, was received by Poland in 2004–6; another package, worth €67 billion (European Commission 2009), was launched for 2007–13. The third package of EU funds made available to Poland for the 2014–20 programming period amounted to approximately €86 billion (European Commission 2016).

Poland adopted European cohesion policy solutions in the areas of programming, management, financing, monitoring, evaluation and the selection of projects. One of the most important decisions made concerned the level of decentralisation in the management of structural funds. Poland adopted a relatively decentralised model, allocating a significant scope of resources and responsibilities for management to the voivodeship level and introducing—starting in the period 2007–13—regional operational programmes, managed by the voivodeship governments, in addition to national operational programmes.

Tasks facing regional governments

The scope of the tasks for which local governments are responsible, at both the voivodeship and the local level, are very broad and have a specific character (depending on the level); therefore the roles of the governments are defined in slightly different ways. The commune is the local government level closest to the inhabitants ('first-contact local government'), responsible for satisfying the day-to-day needs of the citizens by providing basic public services, and this is the space in which efficient officials operate. But it is not only that—the commune is also responsible for conducting development policy.

In contrast, the basic task of the voivodeship government should be to create conditions for the long-term economic and social development of the region. The Act on Self-Government at the Voivodeship Level—adopted in 1999—equips voivodeships with competences to conduct regional policy in many areas. The marshal—as the leader of the executive board chosen by the elected regional assembly—deals with a wide range of tasks: from providing special forms of support for branches of the economy and businesses to ensuring investment in education, culture and infrastructure—all based on a broader and more comprehensive understanding of development. It would seem that in this case, more than efficient administrators, visionaries—with passion and ambition—are needed.

However, there is a great need to create a solid foundation for both approaches: bureaucratic and visionary. The ability to look beyond the perspective of current policy and administrative action—at all levels of government—is rooted in experience and founded on a sense of responsibility. At the same time, it is the clerical attitude, that is, the attachment to realism and tendency to describe processes in terms of repetitive and transparent procedures, which underpins all successful and stable state institutions.

Both visionaries and bureaucrats have an important place in the modern state. If we talk about the need to build and strengthen self-government, it is not about defending some abstract status quo, but about reliable recognition of the state of affairs and the direction in which self-government in Poland and Europe is heading. Governmental structures may struggle—regardless of our will—to cope with the increase in global and European migration, the mobility of capital, environmental and climate challenges, and the decrease in the number of people coming into the world. Officials and visionaries, and there is a need for both, are the people who have the power to succeed or fail in

building these structures in this global context, and a rapidly changing world expects radical action, determination and competence.

An official with no vision—but who is effective in action—lives in a world in which the authorities can do everything or at least a great number of things. Such a world is first and foremost managed, and less understood and changed, as the need and potential for change, the benefits that can be achieved by it and also the upcoming threats it faces cannot be seen. We cannot afford for this to be the world in which we live, and this certainly cannot be the case for the Polish provincial governments. The government is only satisfied with the ‘office’ in its traditional form, that is, if it is based on authority that has an open, responsible and coherent concept of action. This is a forgotten but profound understanding of politics. Authority is the place in the social hierarchy which takes responsibility for the community and makes effective use of the available tools, in particular a corps of competent officials.

The right solution for our times and challenges should be the gradual transition from a structure focused on official efficiency to a model in which vision, knowledge and competence determine the space available for the efficient operation of the office and its interaction with the environment.

West Pomeranian self-government

In the regional government of West Pomerania both the attitudes mentioned above are being naturally balanced to an increasing extent. This is partly a question of generational changes, because young people—and the structures of the voivodeship government are increasingly becoming a place of work for ambitious young people—are usually characterised by visionary enthusiasm. It is also a result of overlapping difficult experiences. Political and economic changes, the collapse of large companies in the past, unfavourable demographic factors and even the peripheral location of the region in relation to the centre of the country are challenges that call for wisdom in action. If we talk about local government employees as ‘bureaucrats’, then it would be in the best sense of the word—connected with experience, responsibility and inventiveness.

Employees in particular departments who are responsible for specific fragments of reality know—or should know—the current approach of the voivodeship government in their given area, its objectives and, consequently, its expectations of entities operating in the region’s environment and, of course, the instruments it uses. This is the essence of development policy in the world of self-government and is what drives the objectives and functioning of local government. It is the policies that give rise to the strategy for action and to the distribution of funds, as well as to the prioritisation of investments and initiatives. Public policies refer to current ‘bureaucratic activity’, but they are built around a specific vision, and also around the programme and the concept of the world created by the regional government. However, what envelops these policies is clerical competence, meticulousness, knowledge and effectiveness in proceedings.

The development of both the commune and the voivodeship should not be thought of in terms of a strategy document—or a development programme, which contains a catalogue of objectives and identifies the directions of development—but in terms of a process: creating a vision and implementing it by mobilising people, resources and means, as well as directing and coordinating actions to achieve objectives. Local-government development policies evolve because their vision of the world and possibilities for action take into account changing conditions. However, the values do not change and nor do the criteria for assessing what is important. The mandate of those who lead the regional government remains the same, as does their power to define the objectives of action and take responsibility for the implementation of these objectives.

The marshal of Zachodniopomorskie Voivodeship is a leader who is not held hostage by a vision but tries to manage it effectively—through policies and all the other elements that together form the West Pomeranian Development Programming Model. At the top level this model forms a strategy for the development of the voivodeship, and this is closely integrated with a territorial dimension that describes the spatial development plan for the voivodeship. The second level consists of development policies, which define what lies under the voivodeship government's direct or indirect management in all areas that constitute its field activity, for example, in the economy, transport, health care and tourism. Its policies also define its relations with other government levels and local government—key partners for development.

The solutions adopted in Western Pomerania in the area of development policy can be seen as a 'happy medium'—they are preparing us for the future, but we have to work hard on them today. In two decades' time, the marshal will no longer be, first and foremost, the manager of EU funds, but the co-creator and implementer of the next stage of Poland's local and regional development, with less money from European cohesion policy and more in the way of national and regional resources, including financial means.

Self-government is irreplaceable in terms of activating the financial potential of communes and entire regions, establishing and activating development agreements, and establishing thriving areas around cities and large enterprises. In all this, the vision must be half a step ahead of the marshal, and the marshal must ensure that naturally conservative bureaucrats are not left behind.

A concept to be tested in battle

The West Pomeranian Development Programming Model has entered into force and its individual elements are gradually being implemented. This is not an easy or quick venture. Every office is, by its nature, conservative, and thus constitutes a pillar of the existing order. It is important for us to have the courage to gain new experiences by making contact with the external environment. Having a vision in local government can also be seen as being open to cooperation with external entities. This is an invaluable element of the public policies that have been implemented by the West Pomeranian Voivodeship government.

The direct responsibility for regional development planning and programming which rests with the voivodeship government positions it as a leader and coordinator of development activities in the region. The very concept of development today requires redefinition and a search for new tools to implement development policy.

Local government will not solve the world's problems, but it can be an instrument for organising development processes. It acts as an intermediary between what is local and what is national and European. Within regional self-government it is possible to build relations between local activity and entrepreneurship and wider contexts—with the interest of the state and the creation and use of support instruments overcoming local limitations. Development has a local dimension in essence, but requires the voivodeship as a support and stimulation mechanism.

Local Government Contracts

One of West Pomerania's unique concepts for the creation of territorial policy is the Local Government Contract. This is a negotiating tool for planning and implementing integrated projects important for the development of a given area, as defined by a voluntary agreement among a group of local governments. It is important that Local Government Contracts are created on the basis of cooperation between all development process partners present in a given area, which might include local governments, entrepreneurs, non-governmental organisations, and the education or science sector.

The Local Government Contract is one of the basic tools used for the implementation of interventions that form part of the Regional Operational Programme of the West Pomeranian Voivodeship (ROP) in the period 2014–20. Entities carrying out projects under Contracts have ring-fenced funds within the budgets of specific ROP priorities for the implementation of previously agreed projects. Each Local Government Contract outlines common objectives that focus on ensuring good conditions for economic development in the area it covers. An indispensable element of the Contracts is the bundling of projects: both infrastructural projects, related to the development of investment areas or ensuring better public transport, and those focused on improving the quality of human capital in relation to the needs of the West Pomeranian labour market. Because of the latter, among the bundles submitted under the Contracts one can find projects that focus on increasing the mobility of employees and developing curricula, especially in vocational schools. Modern vocational education must respond to the needs of local business. It is good that our local governments can see this so clearly, referring to its potential when investing in education.

The formula adopted for the implementation of interconnected, integrated projects undertaken both by local governments covered by a Local Government Contract and by other partners, such as entrepreneurs or non-governmental organisations, is of great importance to the success of this mechanism. Joint actions to economically develop particular parts of the region, and thus the entire region, are launched in a bottom-up manner. In this way, local governments, acting in partnership and with the support of regional

governments, are able to influence the economic potential and development of the labour market in a comprehensive manner, or reduce the limitations on this potential.

One of the six Local Government Contracts in West Pomerania, which covers the region's centrally located *poviats* (the 'Central Zone'), offers a good example of a bottom-up and multi-strand vision of supra-local development. Twenty local governments (3 *poviats* and 17 communes and municipalities) have agreed on a common strategy to reinforce the economic potential of the area, develop public services, and improve infrastructural conditions for economic and social growth. A bundle of 19 projects in fields such as infrastructure for investment areas, and the introduction of a comprehensive public transportation system and vocational education, was supported by nearly €10 million of ROP funding.

Local Government Contracts strengthen the co-shaping and coordination of development projects implemented jointly by local governments. This brings further benefits: it ensures the cohesion of local policies with the regional development policy, and increases the efficiency and effectiveness of the use of public funds, including those coming from the EU structural funds made available to the region.

Local Government Contracts provide an excellent laboratory for learning how territorial instruments work, with sensitivity for regional and local differences. They also offer an opportunity for local governments to take up challenges whose scale extends beyond the boundaries of a commune or district. It is thanks to these Contracts, among other things, that local governments now understand that many of the problems they face are difficult to solve on their own. Such a model also guarantees greater sustainability, even after the cessation of external financing. If a partnership is established for the development of potential and the removal of barriers that have previously been jointly identified, it will be more durable. As a result, local authorities will increase their competences and strengthen their ability to conduct policy, and will not just perform the basic tasks legally assigned to them. Going beyond this minimum is important.

Special Integration Zone

West Pomerania is characterised by heterogeneous levels of socio-economic development. Areas located around the Szczecin agglomeration and the city of Koszalin are more developed, while there are problem areas with relatively lower levels of development, including increasing marginalisation. The latter conditions result from the peripheral location of the region's main growth centres, that is, the Szczecin Metropolitan Area and the designated functional area of Koszalin.

The process of consolidating development deficits in problem areas, which are mainly the result of a weakening of the economy and the disappearance of jobs, particularly in rural areas, is also continuous. This is related, *inter alia*, to structural problems caused by the liquidation of State Agricultural Farms and the limited development potential of rural areas. These conditions constituted the premise for the formulation of a 'Special

Integration Zone' (SSEZ) in Western Pomerania, and for undertaking coordinated and comprehensive measures in relation to this area. The SSEZ was first designated by the regional government in 2014 and is subject to an annual update.

SSEZ delimitation is carried out on the basis of an analysis of the values of six synthetic measures assigned to particular problem areas: access to public services, demographics, technical infrastructure, problems of former state-owned towns, economic potential and poverty. On this basis, communes with the most serious deficits are identified. To determine the borders of an SSEZ, that is, the area with the most unfavourable indicators of social and economic development, the principle of the accumulation of deficits is adopted. This means that the SSEZ covers municipalities with deficits in at least three problem areas. As well as the methodology for determining the SSEZ, the principle of periodic monitoring and regular evaluation of the social and economic situation was also adopted, on the basis of which the territorial scope of the SSEZ is verified and the proposed directions of intervention are formulated.

The concept of intervention within the SSEZ envisages a concentration of activities in three thematic areas—infrastructural, economic and social. These correspond to the most important development deficits in this part of the region, which are both of historical origin and due to the unfavourable economic transformations and economic downturns in various sectors which have occurred over the last decade. Support is implemented using both European funds from the ROP and other public funds, which, in a model of close cooperation with local governments and under the coordination of the regional government, are transferred to the SSEZ in the form of 'bundles' of projects.

Conclusion

The region and its structures are not set once and for all. Thirty years of Polish self-government shows that some of these forms of government work while others are becoming less relevant. Today we are faced with the need to find appropriate instruments to respond to the needs of the entire region, and not only to strengthen the best areas but also to improve weaker ones. We have a great deal of experience, but with it there is the responsibility to better understand the region and its needs.

We face many risks. All over the world, including in Poland, both locally and regionally, human aspirations are growing rapidly. The response to this is often helplessness or populism—both are equally dangerous. However, its political role is only part of the function of regional government; it must also act on a daily basis in concrete ways to respond to the people, and this requires the ability to react quickly and effectively with an awareness of the short- and long-term consequences of any action. This ability lies at the heart of the management of European funds, but must also be reflected in important areas such as the creation of regional institutions; the development of the public domain and public spaces; and the reinforcement of community spirit, despite the increase in phenomena such as migration. Recognising the principle of subsidiarity in EU policies,

especially cohesion policy, should strengthen their territorial dimension. A strong territorial dimension inevitably leads to thematically integrated and spatially focused public intervention, increasing the effectiveness of the intervention and making its impact on a supra-local, regional and even supra-regional scale more sustainable.

It is not difficult to be the voice of the people, real or suppositious. Today—especially at the regional level—the challenge is to define power, to choose a form and scope of action that reflects the needs of the community and that also overcomes its limitations. Taking shortcuts or waiting for populism to rise up are both completely ineffective solutions. The local government must speak and act rationally and honestly. This is not only a task for the region’s managers, but also for wise, well-designed regional institutions, as this is a form of development cooperation with local governments and local communities. In the regional dimension, the notions of power and responsibility need to be thought of in new ways and require new definitions. If local government is to preserve its power and be efficient, it must learn to share responsibility.

It is also very important that awareness of the region’s potential and its development directions are reflected in the appropriate coordination of development activities at the local level. Development only takes place when regional government provides the support and encourages action in local communities that cannot cope on their own. We are capable of great achievements on our own if we are supported by the structure of government and, obviously, if such achievements are in accordance with our competences. It is important to trust in even those places most distant from the big cities, in the small communities that have their own ideas for life and development. There, too, development processes are available, and it is only a question of the extent to which we want to support them.

Notes

1. Voivodeships are the third-level (highest-level) units of local government in Poland, equivalent to provincial or regional divisions in many other countries; they are further divided into *poviats*.
2. *Poviats* are the second-level units of local government in Poland, corresponding to county divisions in many other countries; these are further divided into *gminas* (communes or municipalities).
3. NUTS 2 refers to administrative territorial units within EU member states that have 800,000–3,000,000 inhabitants.

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Author biography



Olgierd Geblewicz is the president of Poland's West Pomerania region and the chairman of the Union of Regions of the Republic of Poland. He has been a member of the European People's Party Group in the European Committee of the Regions since 2011.