



Role of Local Governments in Development Cooperation Projects and Contact with the Polish Diaspora

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Local authorities may be an important partner for central government in support for the Eastern Partnership countries and the Polish diaspora. However, there is need for greater local government involvement in development aid projects, and in strengthening ties with Polish diaspora on the local level, especially in connection with the Polish government policy of repatriation. Due to the small share of local governments engaged in development aid projects, their extensive network of international contacts, expertise and prior experience with foreign partners remain unused. Current regulations governing competitions for the support of the Polish diaspora do not allow local governments to apply for grants, yet it is worth changing the rules next year.

The Field for Local Governments. According to the Multiannual Development Cooperation Programme 2016 to 2020, the geographical priorities of Polish aid are divided into two groups. Polish local governments are involved in support for four Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries (Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine), especially in the fields of good governance (regional development, strengthening public administration and local government) and democratisation (construction of civil society). In the second group of priority countries, with no involvement from local government units, there are six countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

In 2012 to 2015, when the competition "Cooperation with the Polish Diaspora and Poles Abroad" was organised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, local governments implemented projects related to maintaining ties with Polish diaspora and Poles living abroad, with the promotion of Polish culture, and with cooperation involving schools and young people. In 2016 the organisation of the competition returned to the Polish Senate, and under new rules local governments, public colleges and universities, cannot participate.

Activity. Local government projects represent a small percentage of activities in development aid. In 2016, only two projects of 60 were implemented by representatives of local or regional units. In 2012 to 2015, this number ranged from two to six per year. Local governments were involved in projects supporting the Polish diaspora to a similar extent. Both programmes are dominated by projects of non-governmental organisations. The idea of these two competitions was to diversify the participants, so that different social groups could support the government in the implementation of tasks in the fields of development aid and maintaining ties with the Polish diaspora. The involvement of local government fosters permanent contacts with partners at the local community level. In addition, Polish local authorities can share their knowledge and experience with partners from countries that are currently in transition and seeking to strengthen relations with the EU. Most of the development aid projects are based precisely on support and the transfer of knowledge to partners in EaP countries.

Due to the small number of projects it is difficult to talk about the geographical preferences. In recent years more development aid projects have been implemented with partners in Georgia and Moldova (seven and six), followed by Ukraine (four) and Belarus (one). But this is due to the involvement of specific local governments and their "specialisations". In Georgia, the Polish city of Poznań took the lead, completing four projects. These activities were focused mainly on the transfer of knowledge in the fields of urban management, social policy, business support and tourism development. In Moldova, the Regional Council of the Pomeranian Voivodeship was most active, focusing on projects supporting the development of agriculture, rural areas and, to a lesser extent, the absorption of EU funds.

Projects for Polish diaspora activities were more geographically and thematically dispersed. Most (such as music festivals and youth camps) were held in Poland, with the participation of Poles living in different countries. These took place outside the country less often. There were also cyclic projects, for example the Borderlands Festival in Mrągowo. Among the projects that received funding in the years 2014 to 2016, most were focused on direct contacts, promoting Poland, and maintaining ties between the country and the Polish diaspora.

Participation in Development Aid Projects. Although some local governments have had several years of experience with development cooperation, most do not know this form of cooperation or see it as difficult. Councillors and local communities expect from their governments international action that would be beneficial to their municipalities or regions, especially in the form of investment. Therefore, the partnership between the organisers of competitions, local authorities and local communities is important. The presentation of the main ideas of development cooperation and the transfer of good practice should be accompanied by a joint examination of means of cooperation and planning activities that will bring long lasting effects and will form part of long-term strategies for EaP countries. Representatives of Polish local governments should also be represented in the Council of the Programme for Development Cooperation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Four EaP states, identified as priorities in development cooperation, are also among the most frequently chosen by local governments for international activity. Ukrainian regions constitute the largest group of foreign partners for Polish voivodeships. Relations with partners from four EaP countries account for 22% of all active contacts on the regional level. A similar scale of involvement can be found among the other tiers of local governments. Many years of close relationships allowed them to get to know their eastern partners, their specificities and needs.

In analysing the various international programmes that engage local government, it becomes apparent that partnerships based on the exchange of experiences and meetings has been moving towards project-based work, aimed at solving problems and expanding cooperation with various local entities. This could also apply in the case of development aid. It is important to transfer experience in the field of self-governance, but this should be done in more detail, and expanded according to partners' needs. For example, Belarus needs more projects in the field of entrepreneurship development, which would lead to the involvement of Polish entrepreneurs there.

Local governments have extensive experience in managing cities and regions and their development. They could share expertise in the construction of sewage treatment plants and waste management. They might also transfer knowledge on the involvement of local communities in the development of their villages, for example through participatory budgeting.

Local governments supporting partners in Moldova have had some success, as many years of cooperation have brought about long lasting effects. Of importance are the integrity and commitment of the Moldovan partners, as indicated by Polish local government, as well as the proper recognition of needs. For example, the Regional Council of Pomerania, which implements projects through the Pomeranian Agricultural Advisory Centre in Gdańsk with a branch in Stare Pole, focuses on agricultural assistance. Representatives of local authorities in Moldova and the National Agency for Rural Development in Chisinau were invited to cooperate by Bielsk Podlaski. This small town in northern Poland, which has a history of relations with Moldova dating back several years, built a sanitary sewage system funded and designed through the partnership for one village to improve the standard of life of the inhabitants. It is clear from such examples that long-term, comprehensive cooperation, including the well-recognised need for partners, is very effective.

Polish Diaspora Projects. The Senate, inspired by the experience of the MFA in recent years, could expand the number of potential beneficiaries. Local governments can reach out via their networks to smaller clusters of Polish diaspora and Poles abroad. Thanks to the local governments' experience and technical support, they are also able to act as joint organisers of camps for children, and cultural events related to Polish communities abroad. Allowing local governments to compete for funds may also be important in relation to greater central government interest in Polish diaspora issues and repatriation. Familiarisation with the subject may prove essential if more and more people of Polish origin begin to arrive in Poland, for local governments would be obliged to integrate these groups within communities.

Activities directed at the Polish diaspora should involve as many Poles from Poland and from abroad as possible. These joint activities would be essential to build closer relationships. As a result, Poles abroad will seek to learn the Polish language, get to know the country of their ancestors, and wish to maintain permanent contact.

The participation of local governments in Polish diaspora and development assistance projects should also raise public interest at local level in important directions of Polish foreign policy, and enrich knowledge on the subject. Additionally, it would help promote Poland, reinforce Poland as a brand, and improve recognition of Polish cities and regions. It is, therefore, worth considering whether local governments should once again be allowed to apply for grants for projects aimed at strengthening ties with the Polish diaspora and Poles abroad.