

Chapter 11

Provincial Poland: Sustainable development and culture in small and medium-sized towns

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Introduction

Over the past 25 years, Poland has undergone profound changes due to the political transformation after 1989 and the EU accession of 2004. Sustainable development has become a fundamental element of state policy in today's Poland. It is included in the most important documents of the country, determines the development strategies at all levels of public administration, and, as a result, has become a vital keyword (quite frequently abused). In national policy, sustainable development has been commonly interpreted as equal opportunities across all regions, in terms of intergenerational equity, territorial equity, and access to innovation – and is directly linked to the Europe 2020 strategy (Ministry of Administration and Digitization 2013).

This emphasis on sustainable development has been twinned with a focus on regional development or, in other words, the development of “provincial Poland.” The expression “provincial Poland” carries a variety of meanings. The simplest one refers to the inhabitants of small and medium-sized towns. Statistical classification in Poland divides cities and towns by population into *big cities* (over 100,000 inhabitants), *medium-sized towns* (between 20,000 and 100,000 inhabitants), and *small towns* (below 20,000 inhabitants). This division, although widely used, raises some doubts due to the obvious heterogeneity of cities and towns, and particularly of those classified as medium-sized. Therefore, the statistical division

includes additional sub-categories to the basic three types, which are used for in-depth analyses (especially in social analyses). However, the three population categories remain the basic criterion for the classification of Polish towns and cities.

Undoubtedly, the emphasis placed on regional development at the time of Poland's EU accession has had a positive effect on the development of towns and villages in "provincial Poland." One can even propose that the results of these efforts are much more visible in small and medium-sized towns than in big cities. It is in small and medium-sized towns where the development of infrastructure, internal migration trends, and the development of civil society are most apparent. Living in the provinces now makes people feel more proud than ashamed. It often means a better quality of life and local patriotism. Life in the provinces is becoming a great honour, giving local residents the opportunity to influence their immediate environment and take greater responsibility for their actions.

This is confirmed by a number of statistical analyses (e.g., GUS 2011, 2012) and also more detailed studies such as Piotr Raźniak's 2000-2010 analysis of the Cracow Metropolitan Area, which not only demonstrated that out-migration was taking place, but also reflected upon the socioeconomic processes that caused this phenomenon. Raźniak (2012) showed that, initially, out-migration involved settling in towns adjacent to the large city of Cracow; however, in 2009-2010, the population started to migrate much further away. Great importance was placed on "the desire to live in a more friendly environment in terms of nature, which also offers more peace and quiet" (Raźniak 2012, 70) and the fact that the smaller towns were becoming increasingly wealthy. These factors were complemented by increased investment in public transport, which improved the quality of roads and local infrastructure, and better conditions for cultural activities through the development of public cultural institutions as well as a growing number of private initiatives. Recent years have also

brought participatory budgets, in which residents vote to express their opinions on which things part of the public budget should be spent. Altogether, these factors have significantly improved the quality of local life and attracted new inhabitants to smaller cities and towns.

This chapter examines the implementation of the broad concept of *sustainable development* in small and medium-sized towns in Poland with a specific focus on cultural development and the positioning of culture in these local sustainability strategies. The cultural strategies are derived from the general state policy, with sustainable development featured in both local and national policy documents as the main objective. In the context of sustainability, culture is linked primarily to an improved quality of life. Documents about culture (e.g., *National Strategy for Cultural Development 2004-2013* [Ministry of Culture 2004]) put greater emphasis on the sustainable development of culture itself, while local documents usually present both approaches at the same time.

The examples presented in this chapter were chosen because of their different approaches to the place of culture in sustainable development, sometimes irrespective of statements in strategy documents. Through these cases, one may observe an approach in which culture supports the execution of tasks aimed at the sustainable development of a city or region but, at the same time, is focused on operations intended mainly to boost economic growth. The analysis was based on public documents, scientific studies, and statistics, and presents an array of approaches evident in recent times. To provide some background for this analysis, the chapter briefly outlines the place of small and medium-sized towns in the context of historical development in Poland, and the changes that occurred after the political transformation of 1989 and the EU accession of 2004. In closing, the chapter comments on the effects of implementing these strategies of development and cultural development, and

their impact on the improvement of infrastructure, internal migration trends, and the development of civil society.

Small and medium-sized towns in the context of historic development

For several decades during the Socialist period and closely following it, state policy was far from sustainable development (Rychard 2007, Bański 2008, Heffner 2008). Provincial regions were dependent on the ideas of subsequent ruling parties and the investments made to suit the personal interests of those in power, and were frequently the targets of political rewards or punishments. The national government would concentrate industry or place state institutions in selected areas (thus improving the quality of life in those locations), and could centrally control the migration of people through resettlement and work orders. As a reward, it was possible for certain settlements to house many cultural institutions, receive funding for their development, and obtain the status of a *city*, defined as a regional centre of government. However, it was also possible to lose this privilege, which meant a reduced budget for cultural activities and increased censorship.

The decade of the 1990s was a “crash course” in the free market economy. At the beginning of the decade, the population of small and medium-sized towns began to age rapidly as the young moved en masse to the big cities, where the prospects of finding a job and improving their life quality were much better (this, in turn, influenced the development of urban agglomerations). Already in 1990, all major cities had recorded a clear increase in their population (GUS 2011).

Since the beginning of the 2000s, however, a reverse trend has been observed. For example, the city of Łódź had a population of 848,000 in 1990, but it had dropped to 725,000 by 2011

(GUS 2011). Similar population declines, although not as substantial, could be observed in all the major cities in Poland, with two exceptions: Warsaw (the capital) and Cracow, where the population remains constant. In total, Poland had 908 cities in 2011, inhabited by almost 24 million people, two-thirds of the country's total population of about 38 million. In 2011, more than half of the urban population (53.4 percent) lived in small and medium-sized towns, while the remaining 45.6 percent lived in the larger cities. Reasons for the shift towards smaller urban communities during this decade include demographic variables, emigration, and internal migration (GUS 2012).

The population shift should also be viewed in the context of two other, related trends. First, these migrations are of two types: part of the migration is relatively close and, as a result, leads to the development of urban agglomerations, while the other part entails a complete break from the big cities and very often involves changing one's career and a way of life. Second, an anti-globalization/pro-local approach has become a popular trend in Poland. This "choice" can be seen as related to state policy aimed at regional development, including the improvement of the quality of life in the provinces and the implementation of sustainable development policies. Development through culture is a crucial element of all policies.

Overall, the changes in Poland in recent years can be briefly described as four-fold: redefining the role and place of the provinces in the spatial structure of the country, searching for one's own identity, consolidating forces to achieve common goals, and learning how to build together. Undoubtedly, these changes were influenced by the Polish accession to the European Union in 2004, the creation of a new system of state governance based on the Treaty of Accession, and the need to adapt Poland's internal legislation to EU law.

The policy of sustainable development in Poland, including the sustainable development of culture

Polish accession to the European Union made it necessary to examine the way Poland functioned and to draw up a comprehensive programme of development. According to the legal acts adopted in Poland, a development policy is a series of actions taken to ensure the sustainable development of the country. As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, the concept of sustainable development has become an essential element of state policy, included in the most important state documents, determining development strategies at all levels of public administration, and present in all areas of the country's operation. The key national policy, *Poland 2030: The Third Wave of Modernity*, defines sustainable development as: "solidarity between regions," which is interpreted to mean equal opportunities – intergenerational, territorial, and in terms of innovation (Ministry of Administration and Digitization 2013, 25).

This document includes stipulations about the role of culture in the implementation of sustainable development policy, which is generally understood as an increase in civic initiatives, cultural activity, and participation in culture – and the strengthening of the creative potential of Poland. In this context, "participation in culture" is described as a pillar of sustainable development and a crucial element to improve the quality of life and people's well-being (Ministry of Administration and Digitization 2013, 42).

In the past few years of implementing this comprehensive programme of development, the ideas of *sustainable development* have penetrated into all spheres of life, and the concept itself has become a popular keyword. This is not an all-talk-no-action situation: strategic policies are supported by specific actions, instruments, and tools for their implementation.

Furthermore, the regional strategies are gradually being complemented by additional programmes. For example, in recent years, local development strategies, created by both large and small towns, have been mushrooming all over the country. Just like the national documents, the local strategies also include ideas about sustainable development and the role of culture in the implementation of sustainable development through coherent policies and programmes. The scale of this phenomenon can be seen in more detail through examining the contemporary administrative division of Poland.

Poland is divided into 16 regions (provinces or *voivodeships*), further subdivided into smaller units called districts (in Polish: *powiats*), with local centres and more than one town in this territory (according to the statistical classification, there are currently 314 *powiats*), and, finally, communes (in Polish: *gminas*), where the local centre often has the status of a town (but not always) and is surrounded by rural villages. Large and medium-sized cities have also commune status (the Statistical Office has recorded 2,479 communes). The emerging development strategies based on administrative units are generally focussed on the development of more than just one town or commune. In addition, there is an increasing number of strategies prepared by individual towns but are typically conceived for a wider environment (i.e., not just for the individual town itself) and with a wider scope of impact – the plan is to realize the strategy in other nearby towns too. A similar trend occurs in the development strategies of large cities, which try to cater to the needs of their current residents as well as those people living in the broader urban agglomeration.

A second type of development strategy focuses on different functional areas of the state, such as strategies for the sustainable development of culture. According to the general policy document, *Poland 2030: The Third Wave of Modernity*, all policy documents must include

provisions concerning regulations about sustainable development. Two of the most important documents of this type are *National Strategy for Cultural Development 2004-2013* (Ministry of Culture 2004) and *Supplement to the National Strategy for Cultural Development 2004-2020* (Ministry of Culture 2005). Their main strategic objective is to achieve sustainable development of culture in the regions, and they place an emphasis on providing appropriate conditions for the development of culture and on creating instruments that will make that possible.

In recent years, at the administrative level, there are more and more documents under the common name of “cultural development strategies.” These documents refer to the national cultural strategy (Ministry of Culture 2004) and the general strategic documents for sustainable development but, to a large extent, result from an evaluation of the state’s cultural facilities and determine prospects for development. There are clear echoes of a new way of thinking about culture and treating it as a pillar of sustainable development. Local strategies for cultural development are primarily prepared by local cultural institutions, which is the case for small towns such as Sompolno, Rzeczenica, Wołomin, and Szklarska Poręba. To a large extent, a diagnosis of the cultural situation takes into account the role each local cultural institution plays in the implementation of the town’s statutory obligation to undertake cultural activities. The most frequently raised issue is the role of culture in sustainable development, which tends to focus in three main areas: in initiatives aimed at stimulating residents into action, in maintaining traditions, and in creating tourism products and influencing the town’s image and local labour market. Small and medium-sized towns are increasingly recognising that joint cultural activities contribute to strong local communities, bringing their inhabitants together, giving residents a greater sense of belonging, and making them want to actively

participate in their town's development (Plebańczyk 2012, see also Kangas and Sokka, in this volume).

Culture in local sustainable development strategies: Two approaches

The examples of Zator and the Cittaslow Network illustrate the two most common, but very different, approaches to the issue of defining roles for culture in local sustainable development. In the first case, the strategy is based on creating a comprehensive tourism product – virtually all activities are focused on the development of a tourism product and making the town richer, and culture is specifically understood as a pillar of sustainable development. In the second case, the focus is on building a network where culture is an important part of the idea of local residents' well-being.

A tourism-based strategy – Zator

The town of Zator is located in southern Poland between two large cities – Cracow and Katowice – and among several smaller ones. The town's history goes back to the fifteenth century, when the territorial division of the Duchy of Oświęcim gave rise to the Duchy of Zator, whose seat received the status of a town. The Duchy's legacy includes some pieces of tangible heritage, such as a church, a palace, and the historic urban layout. The monuments themselves, however, have been repeatedly rebuilt and do not constitute a tourist attraction as such. There are many similar places in this part of Poland, and the town does not dwell on these historic features for attracting visitors. In fact, the palace is not accessible to tourists but is used as the headquarters of one of the local companies.

For many years, Zator was home to aggregate mines, which degraded the immediate environment. A significant number of excavations, which were subsequently flooded with

water, occupy about 22 percent of the commune's territory. Along with the nearby Skawa and Vistula Rivers, the excavated areas quickly became the habitat of numerous waterfowl. This led to the creation of a nature reserve. In 2005, the town of Zator launched a local sustainable development strategy for the 2005 to 2013 period (Gmina Zator 2005), followed by one for the 2014 to 2022 period (Gmina Zator 2014). The town's strategy focuses on creating the right conditions for business development and improving the quality of life of residents. It entails specific objectives to be achieved and instruments for their implementation.

With the 2005 strategy, Zator decided to rehabilitate the degraded green areas and reintroduce fish farming, including carp, which is fish traditionally eaten in Poland, especially during the Christmas season. The strategic initiatives primarily included the development of water bodies, the improvement of infrastructure around them, and a number of actions to protect the landscape and wildlife. The strategy included, for example, the creation of educational trails and the Folk Sculpture Gallery, including the area in the "Natura 2000" European network and the European Greenways bicycle trail EuroVelo R4: Cracow – Morawy – Wiedeń. The Dolina Karpia (Carp Valley) covers the area of the historic carp-farming region from the Middle Ages. The entire project, initially aimed at the development of fish processing, slowly evolved towards tourism associated with carp.

The Carp Valley Regional Cultural Centre in Zator, which emerged from a simple cultural center, has been implementing projects aimed at supporting this objective and now offers an array of activities, including: The Carp Festival, angling competitions for children and teenagers, The Best Water Reservoir Manager Contest, The National Canoeing Trip, The Commune's Summer Football Championship, The Winter Volleyball Championship, and The

Commune's Harvest Festival. In addition to such activities directly promoting the Carp Valley, the cultural centre also engages in "normal" activities aimed at cultural education and boasts that in recent years it has managed to encourage the residents to participate in its offerings more often.

The town intensely motivates its residents into action – it helps develop small businesses and create tourist infrastructure, improves the quality of life through the development of public and housing infrastructure, and supports the growth of sport and culture. Many initiatives are aimed at building the brand of Zator and at boosting local patriotism. Today, Zator is famous for its regional dish, Zator carp, and its wicker industry. Numerous initiatives are also undertaken by the Society of the Zator Region Enthusiasts. The town is implementing the Leader+ programme (a European Union initiative to support rural development projects initiated at the local level in order to revitalize rural areas and create jobs) through supporting the Local Action Group named the Carp Valley Association. The main objective of the association (identical to the town's strategy) is to support the sustainable development of the Carp Valley, stimulating residents into action and involving them in the implementation of specific projects aimed at local development. Entrepreneurs who are the most active in promoting the town receive the Golden Scale Award, and the most supportive individuals from outside the town are given honorary citizenship.

Through the development of the Carp Valley, the town became so popular that it decided to look for other ideas to improve the quality of life of inhabitants and to strengthen the existing tourism product. In 2008, a private investor, in cooperation with the commune and the Institute of Zoology of Jagiellonian University, launched Zator Land – a huge edutainment park about dinosaurs. Although some criticize the theme park and claim it is at odds with the

idea of sustainable development in the context of promoting Zator's culture, history, and natural assets, it should be noted that the place has significantly improved local tourism and inspired other towns to attempt similar initiatives (e.g., another similar amusement park was created in the nearby town of Inwałd).

All of these activities aim to support the town's development, although there are some doubts about whether the one-sidedness of this tourism-focused approach is appropriate. If all activities are concentrated on a single theme, this does not constitute the sustainable development of a rich local culture, and there are no other cultural initiatives apart from those endorsed by the cultural centre. But the town has become recognizable, and the quality of life has improved substantially. The initiatives taken have not only made Zator more popular, but they have also stimulated the local population to become more active. It is worth noting that the local cultural centre hired new staff and improved its infrastructure. It has also significantly expanded its offer, even if it is slightly one-sided towards tourism.

Networking: Polish towns in the Cittaslow Network

A different type of initiative worth mentioning in the context of sustainable development involves the more than ten Polish towns that are members of the Cittaslow International Network. The idea of *slow* has permeated many areas of life. In general, it implies joint efforts of inhabitants, focuses on transparency and openness, and promotes the development of towns sensitive to the needs of hard-pressed and overworked men and women of the 21st century. Today, the concept of a *slow life* is becoming increasingly popular, and is positioned in contrast to mass culture with its repetitiveness of lifestyles and models.

The Polish National Cittaslow Network was established in 2005. It is an initiative of the regional government of Warmia and Masuria, undertaken as part of the Sustainable Development Strategy of Poland. This region is often referred to as the “green lungs of Poland” or “the land of one thousand lakes.” Its relatively small distance from the capital and its rich natural and cultural assets have made Warmia and Masuria the primary tourist destination for the residents of the largest Polish city, Warsaw – a perfect “getaway” from the urban hustle and bustle. This region is a very good example of the exodus of the population to smaller towns, which stems from a desire to improve one’s quality of life and to escape from the noisy and overcrowded metropolises. As a consequence, the social composition of residents is changing and arriving residents are constantly searching for ideas for living in their new environment. Given this context, it was relatively easy to obtain the support of residents to join the Cittaslow Network. Life in the spirit of *slowness* continues to attract new incoming residents.

Members of the Polish network include: Lidzbark Warmiński, Biskupiec, Bisztynek, Lubawa, Nowe Miasto Lubawskie, Olsztynek, Reszel, Ryn, Gołdap, Olsztyn, Barczewo, and Dobre Miasto, all located in the region, and one town from outside the region: Murowana Goślina, situated in the western part of Poland, near Poznań. In 2013, resolutions about joining the Network were passed in other two towns outside the region and they will soon also become members. These towns are marked by rich histories, and their strategic goals are focused on sustainable development based on the idea of *slow life*. What is essential here is using the existing historical, cultural, and natural resources to attain their goals.

The natural direction of the towns’ strategic actions is toward the sustainable development of local culture. These towns do not seek to develop mass tourism but cherish the already

existing cultural heritage and support numerous cultural initiatives, which are mainly aimed at improving the quality of life of town dwellers. Initiatives in force in all the towns belonging to the Network include: conducting an annual inventory of traditional products; organising local cultural events; and supporting initiatives that encourage the protection of regional products and crafts.

All the towns have long and rich histories, where cultural monuments are the tangible legacies. For example, in Lidzbark Warmiński one can admire the 14th century castle of the bishops of Warmia; the town of Reszel features a medieval urban layout from the 19th century; and Goldap, entirely ravaged during the world wars, was rebuilt as a health resort. The methods for improving the quality of urban life in the Network's towns have included specific actions such as restoring historical centres, revitalizing objects of cultural or historical value, and developing programmes to improve the status and accessibility of historical centres.

The incoming residents, mostly the ex-residents of big cities, are the added value. They pursue their passions, often in relation to the traditions of the place where they decided to settle. They tend to blend into the local communities, restoring traditional professions and motivating others into action. In this way, more regional products appear, which, on one hand, stimulate social and economic development, and, on the other hand, become tourist products themselves.

Culture-led sustainable development: Other approaches

What is typical of today's small and medium-sized Polish towns is that they seek to be different and unique, wanting to find something that will make them stand out from the

crowd. In order to implement a policy of sustainable development, it is necessary to reflect upon the available resources and their use. By doing so, towns sometimes discover their cultural resources anew, such as derelict historic monuments, local cultural centres, or records about local history. In this way, it is possible to distinguish one more element that is distinctive in the processes of implementing sustainable development policy in many small and medium-sized towns, which could be called *culture-led sustainable development*.

The majority of Polish towns and cities have long-standing traditions and rich histories to which they may refer, and they are doing it more and more often. This is not only the case for big cities, however. The little town of Sejny is a very distinctive example. It has become world-famous thanks to the Centre “Borderland of Arts, Cultures and Nations” (The Borderland Foundation). The town is located on the eastern border of the country where, for hundreds of years, people of different nationalities and religions have lived, and where there are towns with Catholic churches, Jewish synagogues, Orthodox churches, and Muslim mosques standing next to each other. Culture or, rather, cultural diversity is the basis of existence for Borderland. Culture here is a source of development and a development goal.

Borderland undertakes many initiatives supporting the development of culture, such as the Summer School of Intercultural Dialogue, New Agora, and The Borderland School, open to people from the whole world, and other initiatives like the Sejny Chronicles, Atlantis Borderland (a cross-border cultural trail), and school workshops, which are dedicated more to local residents. It helps encourage and support intercultural dialog between national minorities and ethnic groups, and has a very strong impact for the local population and their awareness of their own history and the history of the place where they are living. The best example is a history of Sejny’s Jews, who did not return there after World War II, but left

behind both tangible and intangible heritage. The Borderland Centre is well known abroad and attracts volunteers from around the world.

A second example involves the cities of Silesia, a region that, for many years, has been used almost exclusively for coal mining. The closing of mines not only led to unemployment, but also triggered a problem regarding the development of post-mine facilities. Paradoxically, Silesia, perceived to be a predominantly industrial region, decided to invest in the development of culture. Some towns and cities turned their mines into very attractive museums that present the history of mining in the area and often the heritage more generally (e.g., the town of Tarnowskie Góry). Through such efforts, a very attractive tourism product has emerged. However, the initiatives are not only tourism-focused. The towns and cities have also taken a number of actions to improve the quality of their residents' life. For example, some former mines (as well as other industrial facilities, such as factories) are not only museums but also small cultural centers that are home to theatrical performances and concerts and have a wide offer of activities for local residents.

“Poland under construction” – this widespread slogan, created by the media, accurately illustrates recent years in Poland, referencing its new road infrastructure, the development of transport, and new public buildings. The best known cultural infrastructure investments are found in large cities, where the largest projects are implemented, like the construction of new major facilities for cultural activities. (Investments in the modernisation of local libraries or community centres have been less noticeable.) Nevertheless, some of the most spectacular cultural infrastructure investments have been located in medium-sized towns, for example, the construction of Podlasie Opera and Philharmonic – European Centre for the Arts in

Białystok, and the establishment of the Centre for Artistic Education – Philharmonic Hall in Gorzów.

Revitalising historic buildings that highlight the specificity of the region and using them for cultural purposes, as well as developing new cultural and recreational facilities, raises the attractiveness of towns and regions by increasing the influx of tourists and improving the quality of life. Such investments contribute to increasing a town's:

- Residential appeal – the quality of public space is higher, more highly skilled workers move to towns, and more attractive jobs are created;
- Economic appeal – new jobs are gained, demand for cultural goods and services increases, and the economic structure of towns can change;
- Tourist appeal – tourist products are created; and
- Lifestyle appeal – residents gain improved access to cultural facilities and offerings (Wojnar and Grochowski 2011).

In addition, in the cases examined for this chapter, all investments have had the added value of strengthening residents' sense of local identity and pride and boosting their self-esteem.

Analysis of internal migration in Poland has clearly highlighted a trend of abandoning big cities and either moving to the suburbs or relinquishing big city life altogether and trying to make it in small towns. Exoduses of the population to smaller towns are triggered by many factors, including the desire to improve the standard of living, escape from the urban hustle and bustle, and to say “no” to globalisation. Distance from a larger town has ceased to be an

inhibiting factor – the need to find a job or the desire to access goods and services not available in one’s current place of residence has significantly increased population mobility.

Small and medium-sized towns have a growing appeal. Their inhabitants see quick and tangible results of their efforts, which tend to motivate them into taking further actions. They feel more and more responsible for the way their local community functions, and this tends to foster better integration, joint management of the town, and real sustainable development. All this makes the prospect of living “in the provinces” increasingly attractive. The result is a changing social cross-section of small and medium-sized town residents. Newcomers often become a stimulus for the development of local communities; they blend in, but also activate existing local residents.

Culture plays a very important role here. Almost all local development strategies contain provisions about the sustainable development of culture, which derives from national documents and a legal obligation to provide cultural activities in a city or a town. Sometimes, it merely boils down to having a local cultural institution; however, more often it means providing the conditions for cultural development and being open to new initiatives. This is best illustrated by a phenomenon especially popular in Polish villages – open-air events (festivals) that present a very wide range of local cultural activities from folk, theater, and music through the works of local artists and groups, to local cuisine. It can be observed that the cultural activities offered by such events unite different generations and are a driving force behind small businesses. Through this, culture becomes a real factor for improving the quality of life and a pillar of sustainable development.

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