Community Approach to Sustainable Local Development

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INTRODUCTION & AIM

Sustainable local development strategies (LDS) serve as a foundational framework for addressing economic, social, and environmental challenges at the grassroots level. These strategies are in alignment with global agendas, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) (United Nations, 2015). In Poland, LDS play a pivotal role in EU-funded rural revitalization initiatives, including the LEADER program, which prioritizes community-led initiatives (European Commission, 2021). However, a persistent gap exists between government-led implementation and resident perceptions, often leading to suboptimal outcomes like low participation and unmet local needs (Swianiewicz, 2020). This inconsistency has the potential to compromise the participatory principles of sustainable development, in which community participation is crucial for fostering resilience and ensuring equity (Folke et al., 2005).

The fundamental issue lies in the inconsistency between the perspectives of stakeholders. Local Government officials, who are primarily concerned with administrative efficiency, may fail to acknowledge the social dynamics that influence the situation. In contrast, residents, who are directly affected by these dynamics, often emphasize issues such as exclusion and relational barriers (Reed et al., 2009). The objective of this study is to examine the disparities in perceptions regarding the effectiveness of LDS, the factors contributing to its success, the sectors it is targeted towards, the procedural barriers it encounters, and the influences on its implementation scale.

METHOD

This study employs a mixed-methods design to analyze stakeholder perceptions of LDS, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to ensure the robustness of the insights obtained. The design is exploratory sequential, with qualitative themes from survey responses informing quantitative comparisons.

Data sources

A comprehensive survey was conducted among 383 respondents across Poland between June and August 2025. Data was collected from 16 voivodeships ensuring representation of diverse local contexts. Respondents represented diverse stakeholder groups including local government officials (45.2%), residents (28.7%), NGO representatives (12.8%), business sector representatives (8.1%), and academic experts (5.2%). Respondents were selected based on their involvement in Local Development Strategy (LDS) processes, with 47.3% having direct experience in strategy preparation, implementation, or evaluation phases.

Analytical approach

Quantitative analysis included descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and comparative assessment across stakeholder groups. Qualitative analysis employed thematic coding of open-ended responses to identify patterns in community experiences and recommendations. The study differentiated evaluative instruments based on target audiences, recognizing that assessment tools for policymakers should differ substantially from those designed for local residents - a principle validated through our empirical findings.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

A comparative analysis reveals significant variations in perceptions of LDS effectiveness. Local Governmental assessments indicate higher ratings for LDS effectiveness, with an average rating of approximately 4.2 out of 5. In contrast, resident ratings average at approximately 3.5 out of 5. As illustrated in Figure 1, the government received 60% positive/partial ratings, while residents exhibited 50% uncertainty, suggesting exclusion.

Figure 1. Perceived effectiveness of LDS actions by Local Governments and Residents (%)
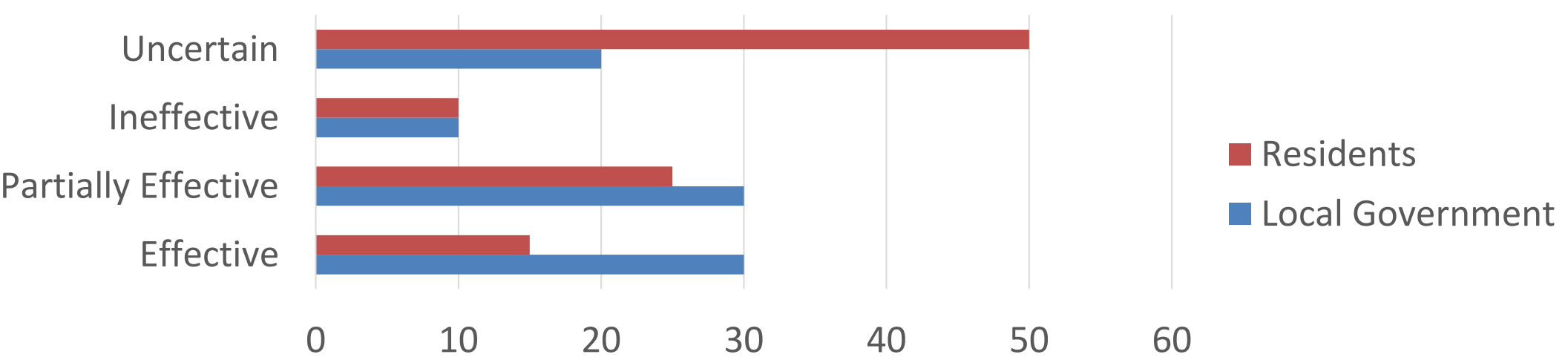
Success factors demonstrate divergent patterns of emphasis. Local Governmental entities prioritize allocating resources (e.g., external funding, 40%), while residents emphasize social elements (e.g., trust, 45%) (Figure 2). As illustrated in Table 1, targeted sectors exhibit notable disparities. The Local Government's priorities are concentrated on infrastructure (50%) and agriculture (35%), while residents place significant emphasis on social integration (40%) and education (30%). The existence of procedural barriers is a salient issue in this context. Residents indicated limits on participation (35%), which exceed Local Government participation (10%), with bureaucracy being mutual but amplified in scale for residents (Table 2). The scale of the initiative influences perceptions, with regional efforts eliciting optimism from the Local Government (rated at 4.5 on a scale of 5) but also fostering skepticism among residents (rated at 3.8 on a scale of 5), primarily due to a perceived disconnection.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Figure 2. Prioritized success factors by Local Governments and Residents (%)

Table 1. Targeted sectors by group (% mentions)

Sector	Local Governments	Residents
Infrastructure	50	35
Agriculture	35	20
Tourism and Culture	25	10
Education and Social Services	20	30
Social and Community Integration	15	40
Health	10	30

Table 2. Procedural barriers by group (% mentions)

Barrier	Local Governments	Residents
Limited participation	10	35
Poor Information flow	5	25
Exclusion of Local voices	5	20
Bureaucracy and Complexity	25	10
Funding constraints	15	5

The largest differences in effectiveness - defined as the difference between positive responses, i.e. the percentage of 'Yes' and 'Partly' answers - occur in the areas of social and community integration (25%), with health initiatives accounting for the next largest differences (20%). These differences can be attributed to the residents' preference for relational needs, which contrasts with local governments' emphasis on tangible results. Polarized responses also result from procedural barriers that hinder local development, like limited participation, poor information flow, and exclusion of local voices.

Table 3. Differences in Prioritized Success Factors for LDS

Local Governments' Priorities	Residents' Priorities
External funding and project support (40%): Critical for enabling tangible projects like infrastructure	Trust among community members (45%): Essential for cooperation and sustainability
Local authority collaboration (35%): Partnerships with municipal entities for efficient implementation	Active resident participation (30%): Greater involvement in decision-making to meet local needs
Community involvement in execution (25%): Resident participation as a tool for delivery	Access to information and education (25%): Improved awareness to empower communities
Clear strategy and planning (20%): Well-defined goals to guide sustainable outcomes	Social integration initiatives (20%): Events and inclusivity for vulnerable groups
Lower emphasis on social aspects (e.g., trust ~5%)	Resource factors less prioritized (e.g., funding ~15%)

Top priorities in mentions demonstrate a clear discrepancy. Local governments view success through a top-down lens, aligning with operational control, while residents prioritize bottom-up elements, indicating gaps in engagement. Overlap occurs when both report community involvement (25-30%), but local governments consider it to be focused on implementation, while the residents regard it as fundamental. These differences indicate that LDS could benefit from integrating social factors (for example, via educational programs) to align priorities and enhance outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The divergences identified in the present study affirm the hypothesis that community-led approach, bolstered by institutional support, produce more legitimate and adaptive outcomes than top-down models. The residents' prioritization of social integration and health, despite the presence of barriers such as participation limits, stands in contrast to the local governments' infrastructure-focused approach. This incongruity contributes to the perpetuation of uncertainty and the existence of gaps that impede the resilience of local communities. Key findings: (1) The critical importance of social capital, particularly trust and collaborative experience, in determining implementation success; (2) The necessity for differentiated assessment tools tailored to specific stakeholder needs.

FUTURE WORK / REFERENCES

Subsequent studies will focus on two main directions: (i) development of a novel hybrid model that integrates decentralization with digital tools to promote community engagement; and (ii) comparison of countries that exhibit varying degrees of local self-government.