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## Regional Management of Funds for Micro-Projects Implemented by NGOs as a Catalyst for Economic Activity of Local Communities on the Example of the Program “Społecznik 2017-2024”

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Submitted 05/02/23, 1st revision 22/02/23, 2nd revision 21/03/23, accepted 30/03/23

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**Abstract:**

**Purpose:** The article seeks to systematize knowledge on the principles of financing micro-projects implemented by the NGO sector in the West Pomeranian Voivodeship in 2017-2022 on the example of the "Społecznik" program carried out with funds from the budget of the West Pomeranian Voivodeship through a literature review and analysis of available regional reports. The discussion and conclusions elaborate on the topic of NGO financing, with a particular focus on foundations and associations, from the perspective of their importance to strategies for building and strengthening local communities and enhancing regional economies.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** In order to achieve the goal, the following research questions were formulated: 1. Definition of basic terms related to the topic of the article: financing of micro-projects implemented by NGOs 2. What are the reasons why the phenomenon of implementation of grassroots social initiatives is important for the management strategy of NGO financial support? The structure of the article corresponds to the stated objectives. The introduction describes the genesis, research problem and basic definitions related to the phenomenon of grassroots local community initiatives, including micro-projects. A literature review of socioeconomic issues related to types of NGOs, their sources of funding and NGO needs was conducted.

**Findings:** Micro-project financing under the advance payment system, is an important element in the management of social economy entities in regional economies, hence this choice of keywords.

**Practical implications:** NGO's can influence the local economies in a variety of ways, for instance, by initiating development projects, supporting social entrepreneurship, providing social services, or raising public awareness. Their activities contribute to increasing the potential of the local economy, creating jobs and improving the quality of life of local residents.

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**Originality value:** *The present study is related to Micro-projects implemented under the “Społecznik” Program as an example of how, even the smallest grants with an average value of PLN 5,000, can influence the activity of local small communities.*

**Keywords:** *NGOs, European funds, social economy entities, regional economy.*

**JEL classification:** *L31, L38, M19, M21, R11, R19, R58.*

**Paper type:** *Research article.*

**Acknowledgments:** *The project is financed within the framework of the program of the Minister of Science and Higher Education under the name “Regional Excellence Initiative” in the years 2019 – 2022; project number 001/RID/2018/19; the amount of financing PLN 10,684,000.00.*

## 1. Introduction

Third sector entities, or non-governmental organizations (NGOs), play an important role in the development of the local economy. They can influence its development in a variety of ways, for instance, by initiating development projects, supporting social entrepreneurship, providing social services, or raising public awareness. Their activities contribute to increasing the potential of the local economy, creating jobs and improving the quality of life of local residents.

Thus, cooperation with NGOs can be a valuable part of the development strategy of the local economy. NGOs can additionally have a significant impact on the local economy by promoting sustainable development, improving social services, supporting entrepreneurship and raising public awareness of important issues. One way for NGOs to influence the local economy is to initiate and support community projects that promote sustainable economic development. This can include initiatives that focus on agriculture, tourism and small business development, to name a few.

By providing training, resources and support to local entrepreneurs and small business owners, NGOs can help create jobs and stimulate economic growth. NGOs can also improve the quality of social services in the local community by providing services that may not be available through government agencies or private companies. This can cover health care, education and housing services, among others. By providing these services, NGOs can help support vulnerable community members and improve the overall quality of life.

In addition, NGOs can promote entrepreneurship and economic development by providing access to capital, business training and other resources to individuals and groups interested in starting their own businesses. This can lead to the creation of new businesses, which in turn can create jobs and generate economic growth.

Finally, NGOs can help raise public awareness of important issues such as environmental protection, social justice and human rights.

By raising awareness and encouraging public action, NGOs can help create more engaged and informed citizens, which in turn can help promote economic and social progress. However, in order to carry out all of the above tasks, NGOs need financial support.

## **2. Literature Review**

Nonprofit organizations play a crucial role in addressing social, economic, and environmental challenges, relying on various sources of funding to sustain their operations and fulfill their missions. This literature review examines 72 publications that shed light on the strategic planning, governance, financing, and impact of nonprofit organizations, as well as the role of external factors such as government collaboration, EU funding, and global civil society. The review provides insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by nonprofits in securing financial resources and navigating the complex landscape of funding.

Strategic planning and governance are essential for the success of nonprofit organizations. Allison and Kaye (2005) emphasize the importance of strategic planning as a practical guide for nonprofits. Similarly, Behrendt and Braun (2020) highlight the governance structures that underpin effective nonprofit management. Funding is a critical aspect of nonprofit sustainability, and understanding the dynamics of funding sources is vital.

Anheier and Daly (2014) develop an analytical framework for understanding the politics of nonprofit funding, while Eikenberry and Kluver (2016) discuss the marketization of the nonprofit sector and the potential risks it poses. The impact of EU funding on nonprofits in Central and Eastern Europe is examined by Bădescu and Moldovan (2013), Balsiger and Trappmann (2018), and Fohlin (2015).

The opportunities and challenges of financing NGOs in specific contexts, such as Romania (Dolea and Bodislav, 2017) and Poland (Kasproicz and Kasproicz, 2014; Oleksy, 2011; Widera, 2017), are also explored. Development NGOs and their contributions to global justice are discussed by Biekart and Fowler (2018). The challenges faced by nonprofits engaged in political advocacy are examined by Fisher (2017), Minkoff (2015), and Saxton and Wang (2014).

The impact of European integration and EU accession on financing civil society organizations is explored by Bruszt and McDermott (2013) and Ruta (2014). The globalization of the nonprofit sector and its responses to economic, political, and social changes are discussed in Calabrese and Seibel (2019) and Lipski (2010).

In conclusion, this literature review provides a comprehensive overview of the strategic planning, governance, financing, and impact of nonprofit organizations. The publications examined shed light on the challenges and opportunities faced by nonprofits in securing funding from diverse sources, navigating the changing landscape of global civil society, and engaging in effective advocacy. This review serves as a valuable resource for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers interested in understanding and supporting the nonprofit sector's vital contributions to society.

### **3. Data and Methods**

The authors based their study on a literature review of access to NGO funding sources in Poland. The bibliography contains 72 publications, including scientific articles, books, specialist literature and electronic sources from 2002–2020, with the most recent ones from 2017-2020 regardless of their origin.

During the desk research analysis, the authors used the following database: Scopus and Web of Science. The authors used these databases because of the ability to access them through their accounts and to enable the preparation of a complete literature list for the article. All publications were analyzed in the Web of Science and Scopus databases. The order of words used to select articles is: “NGOs,” “European funds,” “social economy entities,” “regional economy”.

As part of the analysis of micro-project financing in the West Pomeranian Voivodeship, the authors based their study on a review of information on the results of the 2017-2022 competitions of the "Społecznik" program, which they further deepened with expert analysis using the Delphi method, which is one of the tools for structuring the group communication process. In the context of the study in question, the Delphi method was used to obtain an assessment of the local communities that managed the micro-projects concerning their effectiveness and attractiveness to the final beneficiaries.

### **4. Research Results**

#### **4.1 Structure of the NGO Sector in Poland**

In Poland, as of the end of December 2021, there were about 138,000 NGOs, including more than 107,000 associations and nearly 31,000 foundations, registered in the REGON National Business Registry. Of these legal forms, associations make up the majority of registered NGOs in Poland.

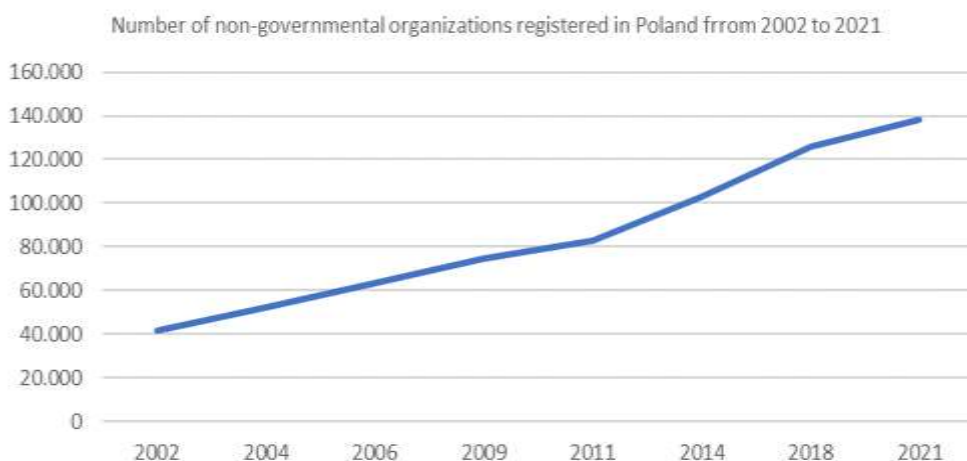
In addition, some 16,500 voluntary fire brigades also take the legal form of an association. It is worth pointing out that the number of registered NGOs does not reflect the number of organizations actually operating. It is estimated that only about

50% of registered NGOs are actively operating, while the remaining organizations have suspended their activities or ended their activities, but have not deregistered.

Thus, it can be estimated that there are actually about 70,000 associations and foundations in Poland. At the same time, it should be stressed that the definition of the non-governmental sector in Poland is relatively narrow and includes only associations and foundations.

Indeed, there are more than 70,000 other entities belonging to the broader social sphere, such as hunting clubs, labor unions, social cooperatives, employers' organizations, housewives' circles, farmer's circles, craft guilds, church institutions or political parties.

**Figure 1.** *Number of non-governmental organizations registered in Poland from 2002 to 2021*



**Source:** *Own elaboration based on REGON and KRS databases.*

The number of registered associations and foundations varies by region in Poland. The largest number of registered NGOs – more than 24,000 – is in Mazovia, with more than half of the registered organizations located in Warsaw.

More than 12,000 organizations are registered in Greater Poland, Lesser Poland, Silesia and Lower Silesia. In turn, the smallest number of NGOs is registered in the Opole, Lubusz, Podlaskie and Świętokrzyskie Voivodeships – about 3-4 thousand each.

It should be recognized that the number of foundations in Poland is growing much faster than the number of associations. In 2021, over 5,000 new NGOs were established, with only 800 more associations than foundations. Whereas in relation

to previous years, for example, in 2011 three times as many associations were established as foundations, and in 2007 the difference was as much as seven times.

### **3.2 Program “Społecznik” in the West Pomeranian Province in the Period 2017-2024**

The solution initiated by the Marshal of the West Pomeranian Voivodeship was to implement a public task by awarding micro-grants in a minimum number of 500 in a given calendar year, with at least 100 for each of the five subregions of the West Pomeranian Voivodeship.

The manner of implementation of this public task was in accordance with the Program of Cooperation of the West Pomeranian Voivodeship with Non-Governmental Organizations and ensured compliance with the relevant cooperation programs for 2017-2024. Separate calls were announced for each subregion, and subregion membership was determined on the basis of where the initiative was implemented or where the recipients of the measures lived.

All projects implemented through micro-grants had to comply with the main and specific goals of the 2017-2018, 2019-2021 and 2022-2024 Społecznik Program, which sought to build the identity and cohesion of the region, including by supporting and promoting initiatives of West Pomeranian residents, strengthening trust and ties between citizens, the ability to work together in the immediate environment to achieve common goals and strengthen converging values.

In addition, projects implemented within the framework of the 2019-2021 Społecznik Program had to demonstrate community involvement, which meant working with the local community, partners and undertaking activities that actively involve the immediate environment for the implementation of the project.

Specific objectives included, inter alia, supporting and disseminating open and active civic attitudes, sensitization to the needs of the immediate environment, supporting and promoting volunteering, transferring good practices and experiences between subregions, and involving citizens in deciding the directions of cooperation and development of the region.

The applications, evaluated by experts hired by the program operator, were subject to formal and substantive evaluation. Failure to meet the regulatory requirements under any of the categories in these evaluations resulted in rejection of an application. Those that met all the criteria were ranked according to the number of points obtained.

The allocation of funds for each subregion defined the final list of applications approved for funding, as well as those that were placed on the reserve list.

**Table 1.** Applications for funding of microprojects implemented under the "Społecznik" Program successfully evaluated in 2022-2023.

Results of expert evaluation Year of evaluation in the first call	Approved applications		Reserve applications	
	2022	2023	2022	2023
<b>Subregion A</b>	118	82	9	59
<b>Subregion B</b>	117	82	4	45
<b>Subregion C</b>	117	82	0	66
<b>Subregion D</b>	120	82	17	70
<b>Subregion E</b>	118	82	3	45

*Source:* Own elaboration based on <https://spolecznik.karrsa.eu/>.

The 2019-2021 Społecznik program also focused on supporting activities that increase youth involvement in the life of local and school communities, strengthen the civic awareness of students and pupils, and stimulate young people to create their own initiatives for the benefit of their immediate environment. These goals covered many areas, such as new technologies and innovation, education, climate policy.

## 5. Summary and Discussion

Assessing changes in the wealth of NGOs is crucial to understanding the sector's financial situation. For this purpose, the average values of an organization's revenues in a given year and the percentage distribution of organizations whose revenues fall within each range are often used. Average revenues are determined based on the median, meaning that half of the organizations have less revenues and the other half have more revenues than the median value.

A comparison of the nominal value of organizations' average revenues between 2001 and 2020 shows a gradual increase in revenues, albeit with some halting of the upward trend between 2003 and 2007, as well as in 2011 and 2020. However, to get a more complete picture of the sector's financial situation, it is necessary to take into account the inflation rate. After accounting for inflation, the picture of changes in NGO wealth is much less optimistic.

Organizations' real revenue levels have not increased since 2001, and at most have remained at similar levels or declined, as was the case between 2003 and 2011 and in 2020. It is worth noting that the average revenue of an organization also depends on many other factors, such as the type of activity, organizational form, geographic coverage, size of the organization and many others. Therefore, in addition to the value of average revenues, it is also worth noting the structure of revenues within the sector to get a more complete picture of the financial situation of NGOs.

Non-governmental organizations have a variety of sources of funding for their activities, including collecting membership fees, applying for grants from local

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government or government/central institutions, and acquiring donations from individuals, companies or institutions, among others. Over the past two decades, several changes can be seen in the level of use of these five most popular sources of financing.

It can be concluded that in Poland, the share of public funds in financing organizations has increased slightly, and the level of use of philanthropy has diversified – donations from individuals have become more popular, while donations from companies and institutions have become less popular.

However, it is worth noting that there has not been a fundamental change here – still the largest number of organizations fund their activities with the help of grants. The research shows that the share of local government funds in organizations' budgets increased over the 2001-2017 period, with a particularly marked increase between 2005 and 2017 (by 18 percentage points). However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a decrease in this trend was observed in 2020 (by 8 percentage points compared to 2017).

The use of government funds also increased by 10 percentage points between 2001 and 2020, despite a marked break in the upward trend in 2011. Sources of revenue are crucial to the operation of NGOs and determine their financial stability. The most important sources of revenues for NGOs are membership fees, grants from the local government or government/central institutions, donations from individuals and companies or institutions. Several changes in the level of use of these sources have been observed over the past 20 years.

There has been little increase in access to public sources, while the level of use of philanthropy has diversified, with donations from individuals becoming more popular and donations from institutions and companies less so. The share of local government funds in organizations' budgets has increased, with the largest increase between 2005 and 2017 (by 18 percentage points). However, the 2020 pandemic caused this trend to drop by 8 percentage points compared to 2017. The use of government funds also increased (by 10 percentage points between 2001 and 2020), despite a clear break in the upward trend in 2011.

The importance of an organization's revenue sources can also be assessed from the perspective of their weight in the budget of the sector as a whole. Such a take makes it possible to see what share of the revenues of all organizations came from each source.

However, it should be borne in mind that the proportion of funds from different sources in the budget of the entire sector is influenced primarily by the revenue structure of the most affluent organizations (the revenues of the 10% most affluent organizations accounted for 85% of the value of the budget of the entire sector in 2020).



In addition, an increase or decrease in the share of a source does not necessarily mean a change in the nominal value of the funds flowing from it. This is because if the overall amount of an organization's budget changes, the percentage of funds from a particular source (even if the amount from it is the same) is affected. Interpretation of shifts in the composition of revenue sources used by organizations over the past 20 years is complicated because of various objections and data on the share of each source in the sector's budget in successive years.

## **6. Final Remarks and Recommendations**

The funding of even the smallest projects in terms of budget has a significant impact on the formation of civic attitudes and the development of NGOs. Micro-projects implemented under the "Społecznik" Program are an example of how even the smallest grants with an average value of PLN 5,000 influence the activity of local small communities. The continued number of correct applications submitted, with a slight upward trend, testifies to the project maturity of applicants at the stage of writing applications, but also their implementation, as evidenced by the almost 100% completion of signed contracts.

The importance of this micro-assistance remains closely linked to the development of local economies. This is mainly due to the fact that the projects are implemented with the involvement of local companies, and funds are transferred to them as a result of purchases made as part of the projects. In addition, those involved in volunteer projects very often continue their involvement by returning to work (people 65+) or become involved in mentoring young project participants just entering the labor market.

The authors recommend that entities utilizing support for their non-profit organizations, not only within the Społecznik Program, focus primarily on pre-project needs analysis of the ultimate beneficiaries when preparing their projects.

Based on a literature review and practical experiences, we also recommend active involvement of the management boards of the project-implementing entities. An example set by top management is always a great motivation for project team members. Best practices in preparing such projects demonstrate the value of consulting not only within the team developing the project assumptions but also among all stakeholders accessible to us. Such an approach, in the authors' opinion, will help avoid most errors resulting from a mismatch between the project scope and the needs of its beneficiaries.

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