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## DEVELOPMENT OF NGO SECTOR WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF EU DRIVEN PUBLIC POLICIES IMPLEMENTATION IN POLAND

### Abstract

The objective of the paper is to carry out preliminary review of project management approach introduced into the sphere of public management in Poland by the EU programming policy. One of driving forces of this new approach as a result of the EU influence was to develop new culture within the Polish public management system. Key element of the new culture is delegating part of public policies delivery for the NGO sector on project basis.

Our review indicates quite complex picture with some key features of particular importance: a) project approach enforced trends for professionalization and growing up of size/budgets of some NGOs through high procedural and financial requirement to be met by NGOs to apply and successfully implement projects; b) however, the same requirement created a formal institutional wall for smaller organizations; c) it seems that some concerns related to overdependence of NGOs to donors at the expense of bottom-up identified areas of interventions proved to be overdue. Programmes provides really wide spectrum of “translation” of local needs into EU programmes languages.

**Key words:** public policy implementation, NGO sector, Poland.

### Introduction

The new project management approach was introduced into the Polish administrative culture as a result of external donors requirements after 1989. At the very beginning this process was limited to the Polish central level governmental administration. At the very first phase assistance activities were carried out by international donors programmes implementation (World Bank, bilateral assistance programmes). However, as a result of accession process EU became leading actor in this area. One important feature of EU assistance was direct involvement of all stakeholders in the Polish administrative structure, including

non-governmental organisations. This process was related to large extent to the following factors:

- a) Scope of EU programmes requiring direct involvement not only local governments at all level but all other actors i.e. NGOs, academic and research centres, businesses etc.
- b) This approach of empowerment of social actors was linked with wider strategic and managerial framework of the EU policies – carrying out public policies through setting overall programming framework at EU/national level while delegating implementation at grass-root level. Some key areas of public intervention were earmarked for NGO sector as a leading partner. This refers particularly to the selected areas of the European Social Fund fields of activity and to the LEADER Programme under the aegis of agricultural and rural development assistance programmes.

Subsequently, all levels of the Polish public administration went through process of changing their *modus operandi* not only within managing of their internal activities. Their relationship within the framework of EU programmes with other stakeholders in some areas of social and economic policies delivery had to come through some changes and adaptation processes. One of key factor was direct introduction of project management approach into the Polish domestic administrative sphere through allocating part of public budget at all levels for tasks to be delivered by external suppliers. Thus, many key managerial instruments were transferred from the EU programmes implementation system towards the Polish legal and managerial framework.

The objective of this preliminary review is to analyse impact of the project management approach on transformation of relationships between public sector and the NGO sector in Poland since mid-nineties of the previous century. The nature of these relationships has an importance due to their role in implementation of public policies in Poland. Involvement of NGOs in this area shall be perceived as a critical factor for effective policies delivery. Particularly in view of policies supporting all types of bottom-up activities aimed at facilitating more active involvement of Poles and their self-representative organisation in public life and various types of socio-economical activities.

## Methodological comments

The main methodological problem concerns lack of pure scientific sources as topic of this paper refers to day-to-day *modus operandi* of NGOs and Polish public administration. This is an area hardly touched by any commonly acknowledged analytical researches. To overcome this constrain the following types of sources were used:

- a) Critical factor for any review of this topic is access to relevant and reliable statistical and analytical information as a precondition for any research activity. In this respect we refer mostly to highly authoritative work of the

Polish NGO umbrella and analytical organization Stowarzyszenie Klon/Jawor (Maple/Sycamore Association) publishing regular diagnostic report on state of the Polish NGO sector over many years ([www.ngo.pl](http://www.ngo.pl) and [www.klon.org.pl](http://www.klon.org.pl)). It has to be strongly underlined that main statistical data used in this paper are derived from publications of this organisation, particularly report on the Polish NGO published in 2013 [Przewłocka, Adamiak, Herbst, 2013].

- b) Evaluation reports on activities specifically focused on supporting of bottom-up activities at grass-root level funded under the EU co-funded programmes. These reports allow for better understanding of processes developing within the Polish public administration.
- c) Review of trends of labour market within the last 18 months in the Polish NGO sector through observation of job offers published, inter alia, on web side [www.ngo.pl](http://www.ngo.pl). Types of jobs, professional requirements demanded by employers from this sector mirror long term transformation of this sector, at least in segment directly involved in the EU projects delivery in Poland.
- d) In-depth interview with representatives of three NGOs presented as case studies. Authors would like to express particular appreciations to owners of three NGOs for their kind agreement to be specifically described in this paper under condition of strict anonymity.

## Presentation of results of analyses

Relationships between public actors applying project management approach in the process of delivering their policies and the Polish NGO are complex. For limited purpose of this paper, two areas were selected as a subject of preliminary review:

- a) impact on internal structure of NGOs against their abilities for effective operations in the project management system as operated in the Polish public management sector;
- b) relationship in terms of setting objectives of activities – to consider issue who is setting the agenda? Whether is any particular risk of taking over the Polish NGOs field of activities by developing culture of dependency within this sector towards strategies and objectives as defined by donors policies.

As concern definition after the recent report as of 2012 year published by Stowarzyszenie Klon/Jawor by NGO is meant “narrowly understood NGO sector, foundations and associations, excluding Voluntary Fire Service (Ochotnicza Straż Pożarna)” [Przewłocka, Adamiak, Herbst, 2013, p. 5].

According to this report there are 80.000 of NGOs in Poland as of 2012, of which 60–80% is carrying out real activities. What is important in view of our focus on NGOs role as a tool for public policies deliveries, public resources were

the main source of funding for this sector. Although, as authors of the report indicate there is some interesting differentiation: more common utilization of funding from local authorities by larger number of organizations (particularly in rural areas). While relative small number of organizations have an ability for effective applications for governmental and EU funds. Thus, “strong diversification is still visible – just 5% of the most best-off organizations, which annual income reached level over 1 million PLN, gathered over 2/3 of total income generated by the NGO sector.” Moreover, this trend is even more visible when one take into consideration another factor – share of organizations in total income of the Polish NGOs: 80% of organizations managed to gather 8% percent of total value while share of 10% of organizations reached level of 82.3% [Przewłocka, Adamiak, Herbst, 2013, pp. 10–102].

Similar pattern were identified in terms of employment by NGOs. Just 19% of researched organizations have employed staff, while next 21% have operated on regular basis on non-full-employment basis. 20% of all organizations employs at least 1 staff member with only 5% have at least six employees [Przewłocka, Adamiak, Herbst, 2013, pp. 70–75].

It seems that in view of trends presented above conclusion that only limited part of the NGOs might be perceived as a real partner for public administration for some policies implementation is more than accurate. As regards of any research in these areas it is worthwhile to identify some substantial information constrain. Projects co-funded by the EU programmes are subject of regular evaluations which provide some in-depth understanding of real processes concerning relationship between public administration and the NGOs. Unfortunately it is not the case in regards of activities carried out by local authorities. Thus, our further comments on identified barriers for NGOs to more effectively participate as actors in public policy implementation have to rely more of EU related activities than funded under purely, Polish sources.

Thus some key inhibiting factors for facilitating better NGO participation in public policy participation shall be identified:

- a) Rule of funding – definitely the main constrain for majority of the Polish NGOs is requirement to have their own money for project delivery to be reimbursed after submission of appropriate payment applications. That is really critical factor favouring more financially well-off organisations, and to some extent facilitating concentration process amongst the Polish NGOs. And at the same time this requirements creates invisible wall for small organizations even to consider application. This problem was indicated in some evaluation report [i.e. *Ocena funkcjonowania lokalnych grup działania realizujących lokalną strategię w ramach PROW 2007–2013*, p. 7].
- b) Procedural requirements – overcomplicated, changing over time of any given project delivery timeframe, procedural requirements are equally commonly mentioned as serious impediment for NGOs. It is interesting to note that the Maple/Sycamore Association Report on the Polish NGOs sector for 2012 indicate growing complains amongst

organisations on to complicate formal requirements (increase by 8% between 2010–2012) [Przewłocka, Adamiak, Herbst, 2013, p. 206]. As a result part of organisations even not consider preparation of application on the basis of common believe that it is too difficult for their organisations.

- c) Internal managerial structure – as a result of all mentioned above factors any applying organisations shall to certain extent readjust its internal structure to mirror expectation of funding institutions. It enforce transition from “typical” stereotype of NGO as relatively loosely managed subject towards more procedural and financial oriented body. Subsequently, this process leads to professionalization in at least two dimensions. Firstly, in respect of financial management, where approach shall to become like amongst any other actors operating in fully business environment with additional skills of meeting public financing procedures. Secondly, in terms of more strategic approach in a sense of developing long term planning aimed at identification of sufficient funding. It concerns internal managerial and professional capacities to ensure survival or maybe very successful development of any NGO in longer time span. This factor explains to some extent trends of strong diversification within the NGO sector in Poland.
- d) HR management – such transition demands different style of human resource management. Professionalization facilitate growing perception of employed personnel as a critically important factor for long term successful development. It leads in practice to retain existing staff between projects to maintain capacity building for future projects. It is difficult to assess on the basis of exiting reliable statistical information what is real impact of this trend for the Polish NGO sector. However, observation of certain number of NGOs over longer time span seems to indicate that at least part of them already actively applied this approach. One of short term options is to implement some small projects mainly to secure funding for existing number of employees between larger projects. Additional aspect of professionalization is changed policy of job descriptions as pictured on the webside [www.ngo.pl](http://www.ngo.pl) from general requirements towards sometimes extremely narrow expectations. Some employers demands not just precisely defined number of years of experience, but additionally under specific measure/submeasure of the EU programmes. This approach reflects an image of growing specialization within the framework of project management under wider aegis of public management as is perceived by some part of involved actors, both, on the public administration and NGOs side. It seems that this approach might lead to too narrow vision on issues related to practical management of project delivered in Poland as part of project management technique.

These trends of internal changes within the Polish NGO sector mirrors different perspectives on project management between public administration and NGO stakeholders. This diversified vision is rooted in role specialization in

the process of project management (particularly as refers to the EU co-funded projects).

Public administration task with specifically allocated institutional and personal responsibilities is to ensure smooth implementation of strategic objectives of programmes. Moreover, this delivery process shall meet overall objective programme objectives and procedural requirements. It is of particular importance in case of institution directly involved in any measure implementation. In practice it means that appropriate ministry responsible for developing programme on the basis on the EU regulations delegates task of implementation for regional level (i.e. Marshal Offices/Urzędy Marszałkowskie). Personnel of regional offices is directly responsible for the whole delivering process, starting from promotion, application selection up to approval of final financial settlement.

The NGOs bodies seems to be more oriented towards reaching their usually socially, softly defined objectives. So, their position in project designing and implementing is to “translate” their own objectives into the word of concepts defined in the public management sphere. Although this “translation” process might be perceived as potentially internal contradiction as seen by the NGO sector managers, it is not necessary the case.

Here, we are touching the key topic of this paper: who is setting agenda for the Polish NGOs sector or to be precise part of this sector actively involved in public policies implementation as defined in Warsaw and Brussels? Whether are there any symptoms of culture of dependency amongst this section of this Polish NGOs sector?

On the basis of trends of multi-annual changes within this sector and experience of authors in direct co-operation with representatives of NGOs some patterns might be identified. There are, therefore, at least three approaches applied by organisations as a compromise between their own strategic goals and objectives as defined by Polish and EU programmes: thematic, territorial and “opportunistic” approaches. Each option is presented by specific case studies in tables below. Organisations selected as a case studies are real, each with nearly twenty years of experience. However, to ensure their anonymity only general information are provided allowing for their proper positioning within the sector of Polish NGOs.

All three case studies strongly indicate active approach of organisations in this “translation” process from their own vision to public donors policies. Two first cases, thematic and territorial approaches, illustrate mechanisms of readjustment of both organisations goals to changing external environment. Their management developed highly professional skills to analyse programmes and procedures to design their own way of successful matching sources of funding with their organisations strategies. However, it shall be emphasized – their organisational goals are key decisive factor as concern selection of potential source of funding not another ways around. The same refer to HR policy. They do their best to keep their core, well trained staff even when it requires substantial financial efforts. But maintaining of professional personnel is perceived by both Foundations as a precondition for long term successful operation in their areas of interests.

Table 1

## Thematic approach

Geographical area of activities	Western Poland
Legal form	Foundation
No. of employees	Two owners, accountant, changing number of additional staff depending on number and type of projects' implemented. As of November 2013 – three employees hired on specific project's basis plus certain numbers of volunteers (flexible adjusted to required tasks).
Scope of activity	Support for young people – marginalized / threaten by marginalization.
Long-term strategy for organisation's programme implementation	Owners decided in 1994 to establish foundation providing assistance for young people from marginalized families. At the very beginning the Foundation was funded by owners and private donors as a main source of funding. As soon as the EU projects became available the Foundation started to operate on the basis of set projects implemented one after one within the limit of own financial resources. The Foundation was involved mostly in "soft" type of projects (psychological assistance for young people and their families as a first step, subsequently provision of professional training to facilitate their trainees successful entering labour market).
Barriers for development as identified by owners	Relatively short time of accepted by donors (mostly EU co-funded projects) period of individual projects implementation without any guarantee for funding on the next project which is usually direct continuation of the previous one. It is particularly frustrating in work with young people when long term educational approach is required to ensure continuation of assistance without any breaks caused by lack of funding. Limited financial resources forcing the Foundation for very careful financial management of current and future, planned projects. Complicate application and implementation procedures. However, due to explanation given by one controlling team in 2010 the Foundation does not perceive current procedure as complicated but only as requiring substantial time for developing all demanded reports and other supporting documents.

Source: owners of the Foundation.

Table 2

## Territorial approach

Geographical area of activities	Poland
Legal form	Foundation
No. of employees	One owner, accountant, changing number of additional staff depending on number and type of projects' implemented. However, management strategy is to keep experienced personnel employed in low season between larger project through involvement in set of minor projects. As of November 2013 – six employees hired on specific project's basis. However, three work for the foundation on long-term contract funded by set of projects over time, only three are purely temporary staff for specific project time span.
Scope of activity	Support for rural area development.

Long-term strategy for organisation's programme implementation	To provide all types of assistance for rural areas, starting from support for introduction of new technologies (energy-saving, ecological new technologies) through professional training for rural unemployed up to "soft" social skills development amongst children and young people in rural areas.
Barriers for development as identified by owners	One, main concern: too formal approach to implementation process by institutions supervising projects delivery (too strict requirement as concern interpretation of internal regulations regarding approval of eligible costs, structure of invoices and lack of flexibility regarding indicators, i.e. structure of number of beneficiaries).

Source: owners of the Foundation.

Table 3

"Opportunistic approach"

Geographical area of activities	Northern Poland
Legal form	Foundation
No. of employees	Two owners, accountant, changing number of additional staff depending on number and type of projects' implemented. As of November 2013 – six employees hired on specific project's basis. However, four work for foundation on long-term contract funded by set of projects over time, only two are purely temporary staff for specific project time span.
Scope of activity	Starting from small education foundation as originally planned, subsequently statute was amended to include all types of professional and educational trainings.
Long-term strategy for organisation's programme implementation	The Foundation was established in mid-nineties as a small organisation to organise foreign languages courses. Overtime, after amendments in statute the Foundation reshape itself into organisations specializing in management in all types of training and educational courses, including assistance in job searching (Employment agency).
Barriers for development as identified by owners	No specific barriers identified by owners, process of organisation development was driven by external opportunities created by the EU programmes aimed at labour market, professional training and all types of educational activities.

Source: owners of the Foundation.

The third case, "opportunist approach", seems more confusing in terms of defining crucial decisive factors behind growing of this organisation over time. To what extent it looks rather like typical development of any business organisation flexible redesigning objectives, internal structures etc. to market opportunities? Legal form as NGO is in this context is rather mixtures of conservative believes of owners (why change something which operate so effectively?). Another advantages of being NGO shall be perceived in view of applications for educational projects where this type of organisations have sometimes some preferences over purely business players. In the case of this Foundation it is extremely difficult to reach clear conclusion regarding what is real driving force behind nearly 20 years of organisational development.

It would be tempting to consider some even preliminary assessment regarding to what extent these three approaches are representative for wider trends in the Polish NGOs sector. Unfortunately, for the time being without further research it

would rather dangerous to extrapolate on the basis of available information and opinions which representatives of the Polish NGOs themselves expressed on various occasions. This difficulties are derived due to the following factors:

- a) Strong diversification of the sector. To what extent experience of larger, better developed organisations mirrors positions of numerous small NGOs which are not in the position for effective application for public projects as they are managed in Poland as of 2013?
- b) To what extent experiences of organisations involved in the EU/Polish central administration projects are representative for much larger group of NGOs relaying mostly of activities supported by local authorities? Such organisations operates on much lower budget at range of between 10.000–100.000 zł [Przewłocka, Adamiak, Herbst, 2013, p. 118]. Moreover, access to reliable information concerning real interaction between NGO and local authorities is much more difficult and to certain extent limited to anecdotal evidences.

It shall be now worthwhile, within limits of identified information and analytical barriers, to answer for the key question of this paper. Whether is any risk regarding potential development of culture of dependency within the Polish NGOs in a sense of projects' delivery meeting rather donor objectives that their own goals? In the light of our findings it is beyond any doubts that some part of NGOs managed to work out approaches allowing for flexible and professional adjustment of their goals as illustrated in case of thematic and territorial approaches.

There are, however, doubts regarding organisations applying what was called “opportunistic approach”. Is it really purely passive adjustment to new market potentials? In case of some organisations is probably true, while in other decisive factors are more complex and confused, even for NGOs managers themselves.

What is more important issue is nature of programming activities for Polish and EU co-funded programmes. As it was underlined by some owners and managers of NGOs the real challenge is not scope of programmes. Usually measures are defined in a way allowing for flexible matching real grass-root level concerns with objectives of assistance programmes. What creates effective constrains for organisations are procedural and formal requirements as a main barrier for effective designing and delivering projects meeting real needs of target groups (i.e. too rigid, inflexible indicators or criteria for cost eligibility).

Although the same question of potential dependency shall be subject for far more in-depth field research as regard relationship between NGOs and local authorities, sometimes becoming a dominating donor for “their” territorial NGOs.

## Conclusions

What kind of conclusions might be relevant for key political decision makers of public sector as concern potential involvement of NGOs into project management approach as applied in Poland? First of all that our knowledge of real interactions between public sectors and the NGOs involved in this process is limited. Definitely there are some gaps in analytical and information basis in this respect.

Some usually commonly, acknowledged factors are presented in this paper (i.e. strong internal diversification within the Polish NGOs sector, high entry barrier for substantial part of NGOs for effective participation in public policy delivery created by procedural and formal requirements etc.).

It seems that key question concerns policy decision at the Polish and EU top decision level: what are the priorities?

Is the dominant priority smooth and effective disbursement of public resources under programmes funded from public resources, both domestic and the EU? If it is the case, so the current situation is appropriate. There are probably enough professional NGO organisations for ensuring effective absorption of available programmes. Moreover, other received strong incentive to put more efforts to reach level of professionalism as a precondition for joining the top group. One may say, therefore, that this pressure is healthy pushing factor facilitating better development of the NGOs sector in Poland.

Although, if the current relative weakness of the sector is perceived as a problem for policy decision makers at Polish and EU level one might be considering what kind of action shall be recommended to increase project management capacity amongst NGOs. Additionally, taking into account the current level of social discontent not just in Poland, but in EU as whole, it might be worthwhile to perceive NGOs not just from perspective of projects delivery. They shall be seen as an effective vehicle for facilitating more involvement of citizens in public affairs. And would be important not only on the basis of negative, protest action against public authorities and politicians, but rather in creative way of doing something for their own social environment in the close neighbourhood.

However, any action aimed at removing at least part of barriers of entry for NGOs for public programmes seems to be quite challenging. It would have to be compromise between very strict transparency requirement for public money disbursement and introduction of some mechanism supporting overcoming already identified barriers, i.e. more relaxed rule of funding for selected measures specifically targeted for NGOs. In practice of complex, mutually related EU and Polish legislation frameworks it would take time and administrative resources to develop specially designed implementation procedures.

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