

Alena Harbiankova · Sławomir Kalinowski
Aleg Sivagrakau · Oskar Szczygieł

LOCAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES
TOWARDS RURAL RESILIENCE:
INTEGRATING KNOWLEDGE FOR IMPROVING
THE COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH



IRWIR PAN

Polish Academy of Sciences
Institute of Rural and Agricultural Development

SCHOLAR
Publishing House



LOCAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES
TOWARDS RURAL RESILIENCE:
INTEGRATING KNOWLEDGE FOR IMPROVING
THE COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH

Alena Harbiankova · Sławomir Kalinowski
Aleg Sivagrakau · Oskar Szczygieł

LOCAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES
TOWARDS RURAL RESILIENCE:
INTEGRATING KNOWLEDGE FOR IMPROVING
THE COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH

Warsaw 2026

IRWIR PAN

Polish Academy of Sciences
Institute of Rural and Agricultural Development

SCHOLAR
Publishing House



Series on Problems of Rural and Agricultural Development

Reviewers: Dr hab. Iwona Szczepaniak

Proofreading: Marta Olasik

Cover design: Katarzyna Juras

Cover photo: Janusz Lipiński / Adobe Stock

This publication was co-funded by the European Union within the EU4BELARUS – Support for Advanced Learning and Training (EU-SALT II) programme under the research project “Local Development Strategies Towards Rural Resilience: Integrating Knowledge for Improving Community-Based Approaches”. Its contents are the sole responsibility of Alena Hrabiankova, Sławomir Kalinowski, Aleg Sivagrakau, Oskar Szczygieł and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union

Copyright © 2026 by Institute of Rural and Agricultural Development,
Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw

Copyright © 2026 for this edition by Scholar Publishing House Ltd, Warsaw



This publication is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY) license, with certain rights reserved for the authors and the Institute of Rural and Agricultural Development of the Polish Academy of Sciences.

ISSN 2543-5817

ISBN 978-83-68091-86-1

doi 10.7366/9788368091861

Publisher:

Institute of Rural and Agricultural Development

Polish Academy of Sciences.

ul. Nowy Świat 72

00-330 Warszawa

e-mail: wydawnictwo@irwirpan.waw.pl

www.irwirpan.waw.pl

Publishing partner:

Scholar Publishing House Ltd

ul. Oboźna 1

00-370 Warszawa

Poland

e-mail: info@scholar.com.pl

www.scholar.com.pl

First edition

Typeset Dariusz Piskulak

Printed in Poland

Contents

Abbreviations	8
Introduction	9
1. Rural resilience and local sustainable development – theoretical foundations	13
The conceptualisations and definitions of rural resilience	13
1.1. The models and paradigms of local sustainable development	19
Five dimensions of local development	23
1.2. Defining the dimensions of local development – social, economic, environmental, institutional, and spatial	23
The authors' definition of local sustainable development and rural resilience	26
1.3. A portion of practical experience – evaluating local-level sustainable development strategies	28
The case of the town of Žaludok	29
The case of the Zalessie village	32
The cases of the city of Čavusy (with Čavusy district) and the villages of Orlia, Zdzitava, and Sporava	35
Conclusions	39
2. Research methodology and approaches to evaluating local strategies	42
2.1. A review of approaches and tools for the evaluation of the effectiveness of local sustainable development strategies	42
Self-assessment and participatory frameworks	42
Participatory evaluation approaches	42
Outcome-based assessment methods	43
Indicator-based assessment systems	43
Multi-stakeholder engagement models	44
Developmental and adaptive evaluation	44
Integrated assessment approaches	44
The limitations of the existing evaluation approaches and rationale for the adopted methodology	45

2.2. The principal assumptions behind the research approach	46
Evaluation as accountability versus evaluation as learning	46
The centrality of rural inhabitants	47
The differentiation of evaluative instruments	48
The unit of analysis and the levels of evaluation	48
Operationalising effectiveness in local sustainable development strategies	51
2.3. The mixed-methods research approach	53
The conceptual model of effectiveness evaluation	53
Survey design and objectives	53
3. The evaluation of local sustainable development strategies from a stakeholder viewpoint	56
3.1. Study sample characteristics	56
3.2. The perceived effectiveness of local sustainable development strategies	58
Overall effectiveness perceptions	58
Variation in effectiveness perception by stakeholder group	59
3.3. Quantitative assessment across sustainability dimensions	61
Overall dimension performance	61
Interdimensional correlations	63
Comparative analysis by stakeholder category	65
3.4. Key success factors – examining stakeholder perceptions	67
The quantitative rankings of success criteria	67
Qualitative findings from open-ended responses	69
3.5. The synthesis of key insights and its quantitative analysis	71
The synthesis of key findings	71
The quantitative ratings analysis of key findings	76
4. Different views on the effectiveness of local strategies, success factors, and territorial focus	79
4.1. Noticeable discrepancies in the assessments of strategy elements across different groups of respondents	79
Quantitative ratings analysis	79
Open-ended analysis (34) – a categorisation of challenges and improvements	81
A deep analysis of open-ended responses	89
4.2. What matters most for success: community trust or cooperation with authorities?	103
4.3. Territorial scale matters – divergent assessments and strategic priorities ...	108
Overall effectiveness performance across territorial levels	109
A comparative analysis of mid-level governance – voivodeships and districts	111
Municipality challenges – administrative proximity without corresponding efficiency or higher expectations?	114

Sector specialisation across governance levels	116
The differentiation of success factors across governance levels	117
Implementation time horizons as scale differentiation	118
The universality of the spatial dimension	120
A comparative analysis of strategic priorities and reform orientations ...	121
5. Local v. all? Several surprises from the study	125
5.1. Attention to diversity and social capital	125
5.2. The participation paradox and other findings challenging conventional knowledge	130
The participation paradox	130
Critical engagement ≠ negativity	132
Role-based perception patterns	134
5.3. Clear concern and interest in improving rural development	136
Reasoning the discrepancies in the respondents' perceptions	136
What the findings reveal about resident-centred assessment methodology	138
Conclusion	139
From the governance scale paradox to integrated multi-level systems ...	139
A synthesis of key findings – the multidimensional reality of rural development effectiveness	140
The participation paradox and community engagement reality	140
Stakeholder divergence and the institutional-resident perspective gap ...	142
The five dimensions in practice – integration and interaction patterns ..	142
Context-specific findings – a comparison between Poland and Belarus ..	143
Theoretical implications – towards systemic approaches to rural resilience	143
The evidence base for recommendations – leveraging five-dimensional assessment	144
Research limitations and directions for future inquiry	145
A forward-looking vision – institutionalising resident-centred, multidimensional rural development assessment	146
A final reflection – rural resilience as ongoing democratic engagement ..	146
References	149
Appendices	159
Appendix A. A glossary of sustainable development terms	159
Appendix B. The role and risks of state-sponsored NGOs in local development	162
Appendix C. A challenge sentiment analysis	163
List of Figures and Tables	167

Abbreviations

LSS	local sustainability strategy
LDSS	local sustainable development strategy
SD	sustainable development
SDST	sustainable development strategies of territories
NGO	non-governmental organisation
LA21	Local Agenda for the 21st Century
UN	United Nations
LDS	local development strategy

Introduction

Rural areas in Central and Eastern Europe are currently situated at a critical point of tension between continuity and change. On the one hand, they remain deeply embedded in local social, historical, and cultural structures; on the other, they are increasingly shaped by economic, demographic, and institutional transformation processes. These changes are multidimensional and often overlapping, encompassing depopulation and population ageing, the outmigration of younger generations, migratory pressures, growing territorial inequalities, as well as the consequences of external crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical instability, and climate change. In this context, the question of rural areas' capacity to survive, adapt, and develop in the long term transcends purely academic debate and becomes a key challenge for public policy and local governance.

One of the primary instruments through which these challenges are addressed is local sustainable development strategies. Operating under various names and within different institutional frameworks, these documents are intended to provide a long-term planning framework; integrate social, economic, and environmental objectives; and mobilise local actors around a shared vision of the future. In practice, however, their effectiveness varies considerably. Some strategies become genuine reference points for local action, while others remain largely formal documents, weakly embedded in everyday local life and confined to procedural requirements.

This tension between the declared role of local strategies and their actual impact constitutes the primary rationale for this book. The monograph was not written to replicate normative visions of “good strategies” or to offer universal recipes for rural development. Rather, its aim is to understand the mechanisms underlying the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of local sustainable development strategies, with particular attention to the factors shaping their capacity to strengthen rural resilience.

The book is a direct outcome of the research project **SALT II – Local Development Strategies Towards Rural Resilience: Integrating Knowledge for Improving Community-Based Approaches** (NDCI-GEO-NEAR/2022/434-092-0065), which focused on assessing the effectiveness of local development strategies and examining the role of community-based approaches. The project was interdisciplinary and comparative in nature, encompassing rural experiences in Poland and Belarus. This monograph develops and deepens the project's findings while also attempting to synthesise them into a coherent scholarly narrative. However, the project-based origin of the book does not define either its character or its scholarly ambitions.

The book does not take the form of a conventional research report. Its ambition is to move beyond reporting requirements and to offer a reflection that combines empirical research findings with the authors' long-standing practical experience of working with local communities, local governments, and non-governmental organisations. This integration of research and practice constitutes one of the book's defining features. Quantitative and qualitative analyses are confronted with observations derived from direct involvement in the processes of planning, implementing, and evaluating local development strategies. As a result, the book avoids both the abstraction of purely theoretical approaches and the *ad hoc* nature of accounts limited exclusively to practice.

These experiences lead to the central question that structures the entire narrative of the book. The core focus of the monograph is the effectiveness of local sustainable development strategies, understood not as the formal implementation of policy documents, but as their capacity to strengthen rural resilience. Resilience is treated here as a social process, manifested in local communities' ability to respond to change, learn from experience, and undertake collective action. Within this framework, particular importance is attached to social participation – understood not as a formal consultative obligation, but as the genuine involvement of residents in defining problems, selecting developmental priorities, and evaluating the undertaken actions. The main research question guiding this book concerns the extent to which local sustainable development strategies contribute to strengthening rural resilience and to the role played by residents' engagement in this process.

Such a question cannot be addressed in a one-dimensional manner, as the effectiveness of local strategies emerges at the intersection of multiple perspectives, interests, and levels of action. For this reason, the main research question is elaborated through a set of specific research questions that structure the empirical analysis and interpretation of the results. In particular, the authors seek to answer the following questions:

- How do different groups of local actors – residents, local authorities, and other stakeholders – define and assess the effectiveness of local sustainable development strategies?
- Are higher levels of social participation associated with higher assessments of strategy effectiveness across all dimensions of development, or is this relationship selective and context-dependent?
- Which social, institutional, and spatial factors facilitate the transformation of strategies from formal documents into effective instruments of action?
- Do discrepancies exist – and to what extent – between residents' assessments of strategies and institutional evaluations?
- To what extent do local strategies function as tools for strengthening rural resilience, and to what extent they reflect the existing patterns of interests, power relations, and social dynamics within local communities?

Addressing these questions requires situating the analysis within concrete and differentiated institutional contexts. Accordingly, the spatial scope of the study

encompasses rural areas in Poland and Belarus. Juxtaposing these two contexts makes it possible to examine local strategies operating under different institutional conditions, degrees of local autonomy, and relationships between communities and public authorities. This comparison is not intended as a normative assessment but, rather, as a means of identifying mechanisms that enhance strategy effectiveness regardless of political context, as well as those that are strongly embedded in specific systemic arrangements.

The monograph is addressed to several groups of recipients whose perspectives rarely converge within a single publication. On the one hand, it is intended for scholars working in the fields of local development, rural studies, and territorial policies, offering an empirically-grounded reflection on the effectiveness of local strategies. On the other hand, it is designed to be useful for practitioners – representatives of local and regional administrations, developmental agencies, non-governmental organisations, and local leaders – who are involved in the design, implementation, or evaluation of development strategies. The authors' intention was to create a work that does not separate the worlds of research and practice, treating them instead as complementary domains of knowledge. This defined target group reflects a gap in the existing literature that the monograph seeks to address. Above all, the book shifts the analytical focus from the contents of strategic documents themselves to their actual effectiveness as perceived by local actors. It also contributes to rural development research by empirically linking the concept of sustainable development with resilience understood as a social process. An important additional contribution is the comparative perspective encompassing Poland and Belarus, which remains relatively under-explored in the literature, as well as the systemic inclusion of residents' voices as a legitimate source of knowledge on the effectiveness of local policies.

The authors are also aware of the limitations of this study. The presented analyses refer to selected cases and contexts, which means that the conclusions cannot be automatically generalised to all rural areas or all types of local strategies. The research focuses on stakeholders' assessments and thus on subjective perspectives, which – while cognitively valuable – cause limitations typical of perception-based research. Moreover, the monograph does not aim to exhaust the entire field of rural development and resilience studies; rather, its ambition is to provide an in-depth analysis of one key dimension of these processes, namely the effectiveness of strategies and the role of social participation.

The structure of the book reflects this logic. Chapter One introduces and contextualises the issues of rural resilience and local sustainable development. Chapter Two presents the methodological assumptions and justifies the choice of the stakeholder-based perspective for assessing strategy effectiveness. Chapter Three constitutes the core empirical part of the monograph, presenting the results of quantitative and qualitative analyses of strategy assessments by different groups of local actors. Chapter Four offers an interpretative and discussion-oriented analysis, highlighting tensions, paradoxes, and discrepancies revealed in participatory processes. Chapter

Five concludes the book by formulating synthetic conclusions and recommendations relevant to both further research and developmental practice.

The book is grounded in the conviction that local strategies do not operate in a vacuum. Their effectiveness depends not only on the quality of written documents, but, above all, on social relations, trust, capacities for cooperation, and residents' willingness to assume co-responsibility for development trajectories. In this sense, the monograph seeks to shift the focus from the question of "how to design a strategy" to the question of "how to make a strategy a real instrument for strengthening rural resilience."

1. Rural resilience and local sustainable development – theoretical foundations

Despite the growing popularity of the concept of rural resilience in academic research and policy discourse, its theoretical foundations remain fragmented and inconsistently operationalised, particularly in the context of local development strategies. The term is used across multiple disciplines, ranging from environmental studies and socioecological systems research to regional planning and rural sociology, often with divergent meanings, analytical scales, and normative assumptions. As a result, rural resilience frequently functions as an appealing but vague policy label rather than a clearly defined analytical concept.

This conceptual ambiguity has tangible consequences. It complicates comparative research, limits the development of coherent evaluation frameworks, and weakens the analytical foundations of local sustainable development strategies that explicitly invoke resilience as a policy objective. In practice, resilience is often assumed rather than measured, declared rather than assessed, and treated as an outcome without sufficient attention to the processes, capacities, and governance arrangements through which it is produced.

Against this backdrop, the primary purpose of this chapter is not merely to review the existing definitions and models of rural resilience and local sustainable development, but to clarify their analytical foundations in a way that supports empirical evaluation. The chapter therefore seeks to systematise key conceptual approaches to rural resilience, link resilience explicitly to paradigms of local sustainable development, and establish a theoretical basis for the assessment methodology developed in subsequent chapters. In doing so, the chapter positions rural resilience not as an abstract attribute of territories, but as an emergent property of community-based development strategies, institutional arrangements, and spatial practices.

The conceptualisations and definitions of rural resilience

Although the concept of resilience has become central to the literature on climate adaptation and disaster response, the resilience of rural areas remains understudied relative to that of urban areas, particularly in the contexts of persistent migration and economic restructuring (Y. Li, 2023). Rural resilience is commonly viewed from the community perspective (Dillard et al., 2024), emphasising the capacity of rural regions to adapt to changing external circumstances, including economic

globalisation, environmental changes, and demographic shifts (Wilson, 2012). In contrast to the focus of urban resilience mainly on socioecological, socio-technical (Meerow et al., 2016), and institutional (Ribeiro & Pena Jardim Gonçalves, 2019) networks, rural resilience studies underscore the significance of local differentiation (Gkartzios et al., 2022), sociocultural capital (Wu & Yuan, 2023), and adaptive governance (Scott, 2013). This discrepancy in emphasis reflects the distinctive challenges and opportunities confronting rural areas, including their enhanced reliance on natural resources and more limited, localised governance structures. Moreover, an absence of a universal conceptualisation of rural resilience further complicates its study, as definitions exhibit significant variation across disciplines. We have systematically examined the existing definitions of rural resilience from diverse academic perspectives related to territorial sustainable development, aiming to provide a comprehensive overview of the concept while illustrating its multidimensional nature.

The concept of rural resilience has evolved gradually, moving from early defensive framings towards increasingly complex, process-oriented, and systemic interpretations. The earliest definitions, proposed by Heijman and colleagues (2007, 2019) and further developed by Schouten and colleagues (2009), conceptualised rural resilience primarily as the ability of rural areas to cope with inherent economic, ecological, and social vulnerability while maintaining an acceptable standard of living. Over time, emphasis shifted towards systemic approaches, in which resilience is understood as a property of complex socioecological systems, encompassing interdependencies between economic, social, environmental, and spatial domains, as articulated by Dziemianowicz et al. (2012), Berkes and Ross (2013), Sharifi (2016), as well as Sharifi and Yamagata (2016). Parallel strands of research highlighted the importance of spatial configurations and local differentiation, including rural spatial resilience (Yang & Wang, 2023), as well as the role of sociocultural capital and place-specific characteristics of rural areas (Cheshire et al., 2015; Gkartzios et al., 2022; Wu & Yuan, 2023).

A significant conceptual shift involved the introduction of the process-based perspective, in which resilience is not treated as a final state but as a continuous process of development, as emphasised by Adam-Hernández and Harteisen (2019) as well as Tao and colleagues (2025). At the same time, growing attention was paid to endogenous capacities of rural areas, including self-organisation and local agency, as stressed by Bertolozzi-Caredio and colleagues (2021) as well as Ashkenazy and colleagues (2018). In more recent contributions, rural resilience is defined as a configuration of capacities for resistance, adaptation, and transformation (Y. Li, 2023), supplemented by the capacity for recovery (Zwolińska-Ligaj & Guzal-Dec, 2024; Noworól, 2024) and explicitly linked to sustainable development objectives (Lang et al., 2025). Sectoral perspectives have also expanded, particularly in agricultural research on farming system resilience (Meuwissen et al., 2019; Thorsøe et al., 2020), alongside approaches emphasising multi-level governance and multi-actor coordination (Cox & Hamlen, 2015; Y. Li et al., 2024; Scott, 2013; Williams

et al., 2021), as well as the role of protective factors associated with human mobility (Adisaputri et al., 2023). Table 1.1 synthesises these perspectives, illustrating the evolution of rural resilience as a multidimensional, systemic, and dynamic concept.

Table 1.1. Definitions of rural resilience identified from literature review

Research area	Specific research topic	The approach	The context	Reference
Rural area development	the rural system	the system approach	"...rural resilience perspective refers to a rural area's ability to cope with its inherent economic, ecological and cultural vulnerability."	(Heijman et al., 2007)
Rural development	the socio-ecological system	the system approach	"Rural resilience refers to the capacity of a rural region to adapt to changing external circumstances in such a way that a satisfactory standard of living is maintained, while coping with its inherent ecological, economic and social vulnerability."	(Schouten et al., 2009)
Rural development	conceptual framework for village resilience	the system approach	"...resilience is a process of continuous development and not a state that once achieved can then be shelved."	(Adam-Hernández & Harteisen, 2019)
Rural area development	the rural system	the capacity approach	"Resilience is also related to endogenous processes of development, since one of its main aspects is the capacity for self-organization, i.e., the internal capacity of a system to react without any external influence. In short, rural resilience is an endogenous process of sustainable development and exploitation of the rural area itself, characterized by forms of persistence, adaptation and transformation despite shocks and perturbations."	(Bertolozzi-Caredio et al., 2021)
Rural development	the socio-ecological system	the system approach	"Rural resilience consists of the capacity of resistance, adaptation and transformation."	(Y. Li, 2023)
Rural area development	rural area resilience	the capacity approach	"Rural resilience can be defined as a rural area's ability to adapt to changing external circumstances so as to maintain a satisfactory living standard, as well as its ability to recover, if necessary."	(Zwolińska-Ligaj & Guzal-Dec, 2024)
Rural area development	the rural system	the capacity approach	"Rural resilience highlights the processes involved, sustainable development underscores the goals and tasks to be achieved. Both concepts are integral to rural development and reflect humanity's collective aspiration for an improved quality of life."	(Tao et al., 2025)

Table 1.1. *continued*

Research area	Specific research topic	The approach	The context	Reference
Rural informational development	the rural system	the system approach	"Rural resilience is a critical attribute of rural systems that is vital to achieving sustainable development."	(Lang et al., 2025)
Rural area development	the rural system	the system approach	"...rural resilience... refers to a rural area's ability to cope with its inherent economic, ecological and cultural vulnerability." "Rural resilience may be defined as the capacity of a rural region to adapt to changing external circumstances in such a way that a satisfactory standard of living is maintained."	(Heijman et al., 2019)
Rural community resilience	the rural area	the capacity approach	"...community resilience constitutes a conceptual framework for understanding the risks and changes that rural regions face."	(Cheshire et al., 2015)
Rural area development	human mobility	the capacity approach	"...rural resilience is influenced by several interconnected protective factors and measured on different levels (e.g., at household and individual levels)."	(Adisaputri et al., 2023)
Rural community development	natural disaster resilience	the system approach	"...rural community resilience as a capacity which not only recognizes and anticipates the scope of damages, but also integrates multiple actors (public, private, nonprofit organizations) and coordinates their actions when facing natural disasters and other shocks."	(Y. Li et al., 2024)
Rural planning development	the rural spatial system	the system approach	"This study defines rural spatial resilience as the ability of rural systems to maintain robustness and adapt to new environments through the combination and interaction of spatial factors. These spatial factors are interconnected and, together with other factors within the rural system (such as social, economic, and ecological factors), form a buffer against risks."	(Yang & Wang, 2023)
	spatial resilience	the mixed approach	"...rural spatial resilience serves as a comprehensive attribute that reflects the state of a rural spatial system, offering a perspective from which to investigate the resilience characteristics of such systems."	
Community development	the socio-ecological system	the integrated approach	"...resilience as a systems concept, dealing with adaptive relationships and learning in social–ecological systems across nested levels, with attention to feedbacks, nonlinearity, unpredictability, scale, renewal cycles, drivers, system memory, disturbance events, and windows of opportunity."	(Berkes & Ross, 2013)

Table 1.1. *continued*

Research area	Specific research topic	The approach	The context	Reference
Rural community development	disaster resilience	the capacity approach	"...resilience addressing issues such as the quality and availability of local resources, expertise, skills, and services; governance issues; economic and employment issues; culture; disaster preparedness; and emergency management planning."	(Cox & Hamlen, 2015)
Community resilience	the socio-ecological system	the system approach	"...resilience is a multi-faceted concept and addressing a large number of criteria is important for comprehensiveness and accuracy of the process... Community resilience is a multifaceted construct and cannot be achieved by only focusing on single aspects of resilience."	(Sharifi, 2016)
Community resilience	disaster resilience	the integrated approach	"...resilience is a multi-dimensional concept and various social, economic, environmental, and institutional aspects should be taken into account."	(Sharifi & Yamagata, 2016)
Rural area development	rural revitalisation	the system approach	"Rural resilience, developed through collaborative governance processes, can be built into a social-ecological system to aid the system in dealing with unexpected shocks as well as to better adapt to the changing world."	(Williams et al., 2021)
Agriculture and rural development	the agricultural and rural systems	the system approach	"...rural resilience focuses on how rural residents and regions can improve their well-being through changes in their behaviour and adaptation to new circumstances, as opposed to feeling at the mercy of structural and external forces that appear to dictate their social and economic circumstances..."	(Ashkenazy et al., 2018)
Agricultural development	the resilience of farming systems / agricultural systems	the capacity approach	"...resilience of a farming system as its ability to ensure the provision of the system functions in the face of increasingly complex and accumulating economic, social, environmental and institutional shocks and stresses, through capacities of robustness, adaptability and transformability."	(Meuwissen et al., 2019)
Agricultural development	farming system resilience	the capacity approach	"...resilience of a farming system is understood as the dynamic process of the system to observe crucial changes in its environment and to strategically react accordingly to sustain itself; in other words, resilience is a dynamic feature of the system."	(Thorsøe et al., 2020)

Source: own elaboration.

The definitions presented in Table 1.1 reveal a high degree of conceptual diversity but also allow for the identification of several recurring analytical axes along which approaches to rural resilience differ. First, early contributions tend to conceptualise resilience as a relatively static condition associated with coping capacity and vulnerability management, whereas more recent studies emphasise resilience as a dynamic and ongoing process of change and learning. This shift is evident in the transition from vulnerability-centred formulations to process-oriented perspectives emphasising adaptation and transformation over time.

Second, the definitions vary in their understanding of the functional scope of resilience. Some approaches focus primarily on resistance and recovery in response to shocks, while others explicitly incorporate transformative capacity, recognising that long-term resilience may require a structural change rather than the preservation of the existing configurations. This distinction has important implications for how success is defined in local development strategies.

Third, a clear divide emerges between exogenous and endogenous perspectives. Earlier frameworks often framed rural resilience in terms of external pressures and compensatory mechanisms, whereas more recent contributions foreground internal capacities, self-organisation, and local agency as the central drivers of resilience. This shift reflects a broader move from deficit-based interpretations of rural areas towards asset-based and capability-oriented approaches.

Finally, the reviewed definitions differ regarding the scale of analysis, ranging from household- and community-level perspectives to broader territorial and regional frameworks. While each scale offers valuable insights, the lack of integration across levels remains a persistent challenge. Taken together, these differences underscore the need for an analytical framework that is both multidimensional and operational, capable of linking conceptual clarity with the empirical evaluation of local sustainable development strategies.

A key theme across the reviewed definitions of rural resilience is the complexity of the concept, systemic nature, and multidimensionality. Most scholars agree that “rural resilience” involves the simultaneous consideration of the economic, social, environmental, and, increasingly, spatial and cultural dimensions of rural development. This consensus indicates that rural resilience arises from dynamic interconnections among multiple systems rather than from isolated components.

Another central point is the recognition of the active role played by rural territories – including regions and communities at various levels – in self-organisation, coping, coordination, and self-sustenance. Rather than viewing rural areas as passive beneficiaries or victims of external structural forces, contemporary scholarship highlights their endogenous capacities for adaptation and transformation. This agency-focused perspective marks a significant shift from earlier deficit-based models to asset-based approaches that acknowledge rural communities as architects of their own resilience.

The remainder of this book will emphasise these two defining characteristics of rural territories: their multi-systemic complexity (diversity) and their generative capacity.

1.1. The models and paradigms of local sustainable development

Conceptualisations of rural resilience cannot be meaningfully separated from broader paradigms of local sustainable development. Resilience does not emerge in isolation as an inherent characteristic of rural territories; rather, it is shaped through development strategies, governance arrangements, and patterns of community engagement. The ways in which local development is conceptualised, planned, and implemented therefore play a decisive role in determining whether rural areas are able to absorb shocks, adapt to change, and pursue long-term transformation.

For this reason, an examination of rural resilience requires a parallel analysis of the dominant models and paradigms of local sustainable development. Understanding how economic, social, environmental, institutional, and spatial dimensions are integrated within development frameworks provides critical insight into the mechanisms through which resilience is produced – or undermined – at the local level. The following section therefore shifts the analytical focus from definitional debates towards the structural logic and paradigms that underpin local development strategies.

Rural areas are increasingly confronted with multifaceted challenges, including economic stagnation, depopulation, environmental degradation, and climate change impacts. These challenges necessitate a robust theoretical framework that integrates various dimensions of resilience and development to guide local strategies effectively. Table 1.2 presents such a framework, synthesising key concepts from various fields to provide a comprehensive understanding of what constitutes rural resilience and how it can be achieved through community-based approaches and effective governance. This framework is designed to support the development of assessment methodologies that are inclusive, adaptive, and sustainable, aligning with the project's objectives. Specifically, the assessment tools, such as the questionnaire and interview questions, should include questions related to each main element.

Table 1.2. The theoretical framework for rural resilience and local development

The component	The key concept	The main elements	Reference
Rural resilience	the adaptive capacity of rural communities	economic resilience, social resilience, environmental resilience, institutional resilience	(Heijman et al., 2019; Reidsma et al., 2023; Wilson et al., 2018; Zawalińska et al., 2022)
Community-based approaches	local stakeholder participation	genuine participation, social capital integration, local knowledge, power dynamics consideration, external support	(Mathie & Cunningham, 2003; van Kempen, 2014)
Local development strategies	structured frameworks for territorial development	economic competitiveness, social inclusion, environmental sustainability, smart development principles	(Pike et al., 2016)
Multi-level governance	interconnected governance across spatial scales	type I governance (hierarchical), type II governance (functional), governance gaps (information, capacity, funding, etc.)	(Charbit, 2011)

Source: own elaboration.

The present study outlines the necessity of an evaluation of spatial planning frameworks, theoretical constructs, and methodological approaches that collectively enhance community-based strategies. Table 1.3 outlines various spatial and regional planning frameworks, emphasising the nested hierarchy of planning levels, contrasting place-based approaches with space-neutral approaches, and addressing the principles of spatial justice and cohesion. Consequently, the frameworks presented in Table 1.3 illustrate the significance of a nested hierarchy in spatial planning, which encompasses micro (community), meso (municipal), and macro (regional) levels. This hierarchy fosters vertical and horizontal coordination, which are both crucial for effective governance and resource allocation. By differentiating between place-based approaches and space-neutral approaches, we acknowledge the need for integrated strategies that incorporate both territorial focus and sectoral considerations, aiming for holistic community development. Furthermore, the principles of spatial justice and territorial cohesion highlight the importance of equitable service distribution, infrastructure connectivity, and community participation in decision-making processes, all of which are critical for achieving sustainable urban development and planning. These issues have been investigated, and the results generally support the above arguments (H. Li et al., 2022; Winther, 2017; Cetrulo et al., 2025).

Table 1.3. Spatial and regional planning frameworks

Framework	Description	Reference	Critical aspects
Spatial planning hierarchy	nested hierarchy of planning levels	(Allmendinger & Haughton, 2010)	micro-level (communities), meso-level (municipalities), macro-level (regions), national level, vertical and horizontal coordination
Place-based v. space-neutral	competing approaches to development	(Barca et al., 2012; Varga, 2017)	place-based (territorial focus), space-neutral (sectoral focus), integrated approach combining both
Spatial justice and territorial cohesion	equitable distribution across space	(Nordberg, 2020)	access to services, infrastructure connectivity, economic opportunity distribution, environmental quality, decision-making participation

Source: own elaboration.

Table 1.4 identifies critical theoretical constructs that underlie community assessments. The systems theory helps elucidate the interconnections among social, environmental, and economic factors, enabling comprehensive evaluations of sustainability strategies (Sankaran & Demangeot, 2017). The sustainable development theory provides insights into community attitudes regarding environmental responsibility, while the social capital theory emphasises the role of networks in fostering collaboration among community members (Matthews, 2013). Utilising participatory research methodologies ensures that local voices are included in the assessment process, leading to more tailored and effective community-based initiatives (Paas et al., 2021).

Table 1.5 presents methodological approaches that support the comprehensive evaluations of local development initiatives by offering a range of assessment

methods. Employing the mixed-methods framework, which integrates quantitative and qualitative data, enables a robust understanding of community dynamics and project impacts (Ramsden et al., 2010). Differentiating between process evaluation and outcome evaluation underscores the importance of stakeholder engagement and the sustainability of project outcomes, thus providing a holistic perspective on success (Dana et al., 2021).

Comparative case studies further enhance understanding through cross-case analyses of effective strategies, identifying common success factors that can inform future rural development initiatives (Forrest & Wiek, 2015).

Table 1.4. Theoretical frameworks/concepts/methods of the research methodology

Framework	Application	Reference
The systems theory	It is about understanding the linkages between social, economic, and environmental systems within communities, facilitating a holistic assessment of sustainable development strategies.	(Perez Duran, 2025)
The sustainable development theory	Provides insights into attitudes and responsibilities towards sustainable development, as well as guides research into how communities perceive and engage with sustainable practices.	(Mensah, 2019; Ozili, 2024)
The social capital theory	Emphasis is put on the importance of social networks and relationships in achievement collective goals. In the context of sustainable development, social capital can facilitate co-operation and collaboration among community members and increase the effectiveness of community-based initiatives.	(Westlund & Larsson, 2016)
Participatory research	Data is collected from community members to ensure that their perspectives are part of the assessment methodology (focus group discussion, in-depth interview).	(Hardi & Zdan, 1997)
Case study	Provides in-depth insights into the effectiveness of specific strategies in different contexts, enabling theories to be developed and tested.	(Pan et al., 2024)

Source: own elaboration.

Table 1.5. Methodological approaches for assessment

The approach	The main focus	Reference	The main components
The mixed-methods framework	the integration of quantitative and qualitative methods	(Reed et al., 2006)	performance indicators, process evaluation tools, outcome measures, impact assessment
Process v. outcome evaluation	complementary evaluation approaches	(Nielsen & Ejler, 2008)	<i>Process</i> : stakeholder engagement, information flows, decision-making transparency <i>Outcome</i> : achieving objectives, resilience metrics, the sustainability of gains
Comparative case studies	a cross-case analysis of success factors	(Forrest & Wiek, 2015)	the selection of diverse cases, consistent analytical frameworks, process and outcome variables, pattern identification

Source: own elaboration.

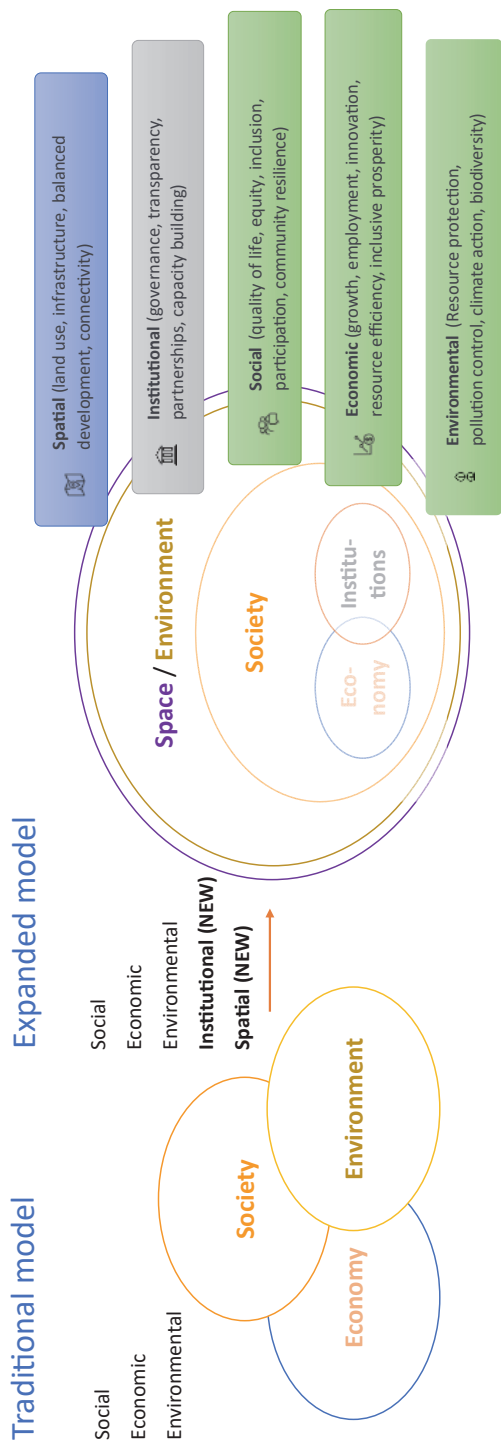


Figure 1.1. Expanding the concept of rural sustainability
Source: own elaboration.

Five dimensions of local development

To the conventional approach to territorial sustainability (nature – society – economy), we have added two further dimensions of a considerable significance for local development and for the everyday lives of rural residents, namely the institutional and the spatial. The definitions of the terms “institutional” and “spatial” that are employed in this study are explained in the separate “Glossary” appendix. The selection of these dimensions is grounded in our previous research and corroborated by other scholars’ findings. The theoretical aspects of this matter are elaborated in detail in Section 2.3. At this juncture, however, it is important to underline that the inclusion of these additional dimensions both enhances the level of interdisciplinarity within the study of territorial sustainable development and simultaneously strengthens its attentiveness to the needs of local residents.

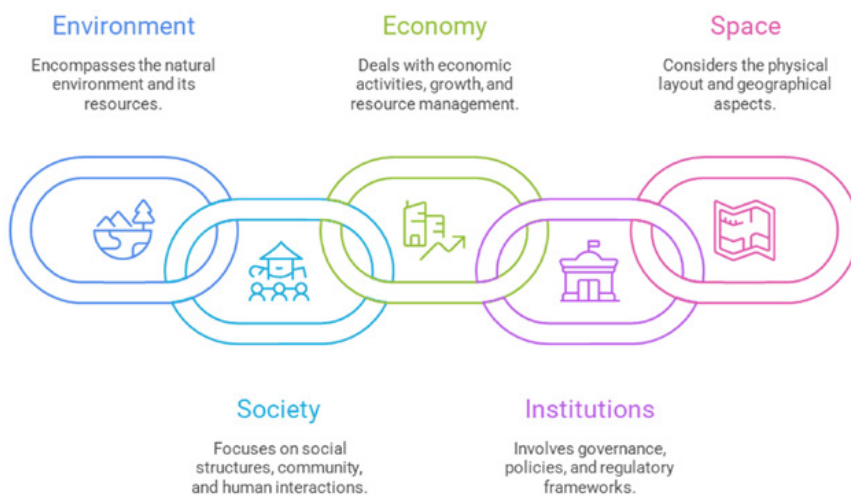


Figure 1.2. The concept of sustainability advanced for the community-led approach to local development

Source: own elaboration.

1.2. Defining the dimensions of local development – social, economic, environmental, institutional, and spatial

Local sustainable development – or sustainability – is a multidimensional concept requiring a holistic approach that integrates several key dimensions to ensure balanced progress. Most of the existing approaches to explaining the concept of sustainable development – as well as to the implementation of sustainable development principles, to analysing the situation, and to assessing the effectiveness of approaches, mechanisms, and tools for achieving sustainability – apply a three-dimensional

(or tripartite) approach (hereinafter we call this approach the traditional one), which combines the ecological (natural), social, and economic aspects of sustainable development. In this study, we expand the analytical and methodological focus by adding the institutional and spatial aspects of development. This review examines how these five main dimensions of sustainable development (social, economic, environmental, institutional, and spatial) are addressed in the context of local sustainable development, particularly in rural areas. Local sustainable development can be presented through these five key lenses.

The social dimension. The focal point here is the enhancement of the quality of life, social equity, inclusion, health, education, and the facilitation of participation in decision-making processes. The emphasis is placed on the reduction of poverty, social exclusion, and inequalities, with the objective of ensuring that all groups benefit from development. The process entails cultivating community resilience, safeguarding cultural heritage, and fostering social cohesion to ensure long-term well-being (Michalina et al., 2021; Paczka, 2018).

The economic dimension. The focus is twofold: first, to establish a foundation for lasting economic growth; and, second, to foster employment opportunities and income generation while preserving the efficiency of natural resources. The initiative promotes an environment conducive to innovation, competitiveness, and the diversification of local economies, particularly in rural contexts. The objective is to achieve a balance between economic development and social and environmental objectives, thereby ensuring that prosperity is both inclusive and enduring (Paczka, 2018; Zhong et al., 2021).

The environmental dimension is a critical component of assessment. The primary focus is on the protection, restoration, and sustainable use of natural resources, including soil, water, air, and biodiversity. The following issues are addressed: 1) pollution; 2) land degradation; and 3) climate change. It is imperative that development does not compromise ecological integrity; therefore, measures must be taken to make sure that this does not occur. The promotion of environmental justice is predicated on the principle of ensuring a fair distribution of environmental quality and benefits across communities (Paczka, 2018; Terra dos Santos et al., 2023).

The institutional dimension represents both the social and economic context of development. The establishment of effective governance structures, transparent decision-making processes, and robust local institutions is imperative. The subject in question provides support for developing policies, legal frameworks, and partnerships that enable sustainable practices. The initiative fosters community involvement and capacity-building, as well as promotes multi-level governance to ensure accountability and responsiveness to local needs (Overview of Sustainable Development Indicators Used by National and International Agencies, 2002).

The spatial dimension reflects a concept that can be examined from various perspectives. The subject under consideration pertains to the organisation and utilisation of space, encompassing such domains as land use planning, infrastructure

development, and settlement patterns. The fixation of the spatial dimension in the characterisation of rural development is based on our previous research and experience of practical projects, which revealed the importance of paying attention to this aspect of development, especially from the perspective of local rural communities and rural residents. In our opinion, the analysis of spatial aspects of rural development will help to more thoroughly develop recommendations for large-scale and tactical actions to increase the effectiveness of local sustainable development strategies. This approach is especially relevant now in connection with the need to develop solutions from the perspectives of the “rural – urban” and “natural territories – agricultural territories – residential territories” dimensions, as well as to optimise the “management architecture” of rural territories with an emphasis on strengthening local self-governance. The integration of spatial planning with social, economic, and environmental objectives is a critical aspect of enhancing accessibility, connectivity, and resilience within local communities. This was independently confirmed by two studies (Järvelä, 2023; Paczka, 2018).

Table 1.6. The key focus areas of the conceptual model of local sustainable development

Dimension	Key focus areas
Social	equity, inclusion, health, education, participation, community resilience
Economic	growth, employment, innovation, resource efficiency, inclusive prosperity
Environmental	resource protection, pollution control, climate action, biodiversity, environmental justice
Institutional	governance, policy, transparency, partnerships, capacity-building
Spatial	land use, infrastructure, balanced development, spatial planning, accessibility

Source: own elaboration.

A comprehensive approach to local sustainable development requires integrating these five dimensions, ensuring that strategies are context-sensitive and address the unique challenges and opportunities of rural areas (Rama et al., 2020; Seghezzo, 2009). This issue is discussed in more detail in Section 2.2.

The expansion of the traditional three-dimensional sustainability framework to include institutional and spatial dimensions is particularly significant in the context of rural areas. While environmental, social, and economic considerations remain foundational, they are insufficient to capture the structural conditions that shape development outcomes in territorially-dispersed, demographically-ageing, and institutionally-constrained rural contexts.

The institutional dimension is critical for understanding the capacity of local actors to design, implement, and sustain development strategies. Weak governance structures, limited administrative capacity, and fragmented decision-making processes can undermine even well-designed initiatives, directly affecting the resilience

of rural communities. Similarly, the spatial dimension plays a decisive role in shaping access to services, connectivity, land-use patterns, and the rural–urban relations, all of which condition the adaptive and transformative potential of rural territories. Incorporating institutional and spatial dimensions therefore strengthens the analytical relevance of the framework, allowing resilience to be examined not only as an outcome of economic or social processes, but also as a function of governance quality and territorial organisation. This five-dimensional approach provides a more adequate foundation for assessing local sustainable development strategies in rural settings.

The authors' definition of local sustainable development and rural resilience

Rural or local sustainable development is defined as a community-driven, multidimensional process that seeks to enhance the resilience and well-being of rural territories by integrating social, economic, environmental, institutional, and spatial dimensions into coherent and inclusive strategies. This work emphasises that community engagement and participation are both pivotal in ensuring that development initiatives are not only compelling but also legitimate and responsive to local needs and challenges.

From this standpoint, several observations can be made. The social dimension has been demonstrated to strengthen the concepts of equity, social cohesion, health, education, cultural heritage, and participatory decision-making, while concomitantly reducing poverty and vulnerability. The economic dimension fosters innovation, employment, and the diversification of rural economies while ensuring that prosperity is inclusive and compatible with resource efficiency (Nowakowska, 2018; Szczepaniak et al., 2025). The environmental dimension is defined as a set of practices aimed at safeguarding natural capital through the sustainable use, restoration, and protection of ecosystems. This approach involves mitigating pollution, land degradation, and climate impacts while ensuring environmental justice. The institutional dimension has been demonstrated to build governance capacity, accountability, and multi-level policy frameworks that enable effective strategy implementation and empower local actors. The spatial dimension is pivotal in ensuring balanced territorial development, meaningful land-use planning, and improved rural-urban connectivity. This, in turn, is intended to reduce disparities and enhance resilience. The integration of these five interconnected dimensions is pivotal for achieving rural and local sustainable development in order to foster adaptive and resilient communities that demonstrate the capacity to address prevailing challenges such as migration, demographic shifts, and digital transformation. The fundamental premise upon which this approach is predicated is that community participation constitutes the primary condition for the effectiveness and sustainability of local strategies. Only through the engagement of local actors can policies and actions achieve a lasting impact.

This study follows its own adopted definition of rural/local sustainable development, namely that rural/local sustainable development is a community-led, multi-dimensional process integrating social, economic, environmental, institutional, and territorial dimensions to promote resilience, equity, and balanced territorial development, with community participation as a key prerequisite for effective and sustainable local strategies.

The stakeholders' perspectives closely correspond with the previously articulated definition, indicating that rural inhabitants implicitly assess development success based on dignity, voice, community agency, and tangible improvements in daily living conditions. This approach contrasts fundamentally with abstract macro-economic or comparative growth metrics (see Text Box).

Resident Voices: Defining Development Success in Rural Communities

„The most important thing is that people are heard.“

— Respondent (Poland, resident)

„We need thinking about the village as a social space, not just a productive one. A village is a place to live, to work, to care, to build community. Village residents want dignified conditions, access to services, connectivity, and opportunities for development. This is not a demand – it is a right.“

— Representative paraphrase (Poland, academic/civic leader)

„Development based on local resources, cooperation, and community activity means creating jobs, improving the quality of life, and preserving heritage.“

— Respondent (Poland, local authority/NGO)

„Without trust and open cooperation between people and local authorities, strategies remain on paper.“

— Respondent (Belarus, implied from sentiment analysis)

The authors' definition positions local sustainable development and rural resilience within a process-oriented, multidimensional, and community-led framework. In contrast to approaches that treat resilience primarily as a response to external shocks, this definition emphasises endogenous capacities, local agency, and the integration of social, economic, environmental, institutional, and spatial dimensions.

Importantly, the proposed definition is explicitly operational in character. It is intended not only to clarify conceptual relationships, but also to guide empirical assessment by identifying concrete domains through which resilience can be evaluated. In this sense, the definition serves as a bridge between theory and methodology, directly informing the design of evaluation tools and indicators applied in the subsequent empirical chapters.

1.3. A portion of practical experience – evaluating local-level sustainable development strategies¹

The cases presented in this section are not intended to provide statistically representative evidence but, rather, to serve a heuristic and illustrative function. They show how local sustainable development strategies are formulated, implemented, and assessed in practice, highlighting both formal evaluation mechanisms and informal, narrative-based approaches used by local actors.

These examples demonstrate how abstract concepts such as resilience, participation, and sustainability are translated into concrete actions, indicators, and assessment practices at the local level. The empirical insights derived from these cases inform the methodological assumptions and evaluation framework developed in Chapter 2.

Between 1999 and 2025, about 190 sustainable development strategies of territories (SDST) were developed in Belarus at various administrative levels. Although the evaluations of their effectiveness and efficiency were expected after implementation, such assessments were infrequent, poorly documented, and rarely accessible to researchers.

Only two such evaluation documents are known: *Sustainable Development Strategy – Local Action Plan-21 of Žaludok Region. Progress Report, Addenda and Clarifications (as of January 2014)* as well as *Progress Report on the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Strategy of the Village of Zalessie ‘Local Agenda-21’ for 2010–2013*. Additional materials with similar evaluative contents include later editions of strategies for the same or comparable territories, which indirectly reflect implementation effectiveness. These include strategies for selected territories in the Hrodna, Brest, and Mahileu regions, published between 2010 and 2017.

This study analyses these publications from the perspective of assessing the effectiveness of local sustainable development strategies and is complemented by a review of relevant methodological literature from Belarus. It also draws on the authors’ practical experience in supporting SDST development and implementation, including original indicators and narrative-based evaluation examples.

¹ Geographical names in this chapter are transliterated directly from the official Belarusian Cyrillic forms into the Roman alphabet. This volume strictly adheres to the official national Romanization system approved by the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN). This standard preserves local identity and ensures precision across modern spatial and mapping data by utilizing traditional diacritical marks (e.g., Žaludok, Čavusy, Zdzitava). A complete, letter-by-letter conversion chart detailing the specific rules for vowels and consonants can be accessed through the UNGEGN Romanization System for Belarusian official documentation (https://unstats.un.org/unsd/ungegn/working_groups/wg5/documents/wgrr4belarusian.pdf).

The case of the town of Žaludok

The first Sustainable Development Strategy of Žaludok County (Žaludok Village Council, Ščučyn District, Hrodna Region) was developed by local activists in 2009 and approved in 2010. In early 2014, a progress report was prepared and included in an updated edition of the strategy, with additions focusing mainly on housing, communal services and energy saving. The goals of the report were formulated as guiding questions concerning achievements, emerging problems, necessary changes in approach and future priorities.

As noted in the introduction, significant changes had taken place in Žaludok and its surroundings, partly attributed to the Strategy, which increased the visibility of the settlement and kept local tasks and indicators in focus. Compared to other Belarusian local strategies of that period, the Žaludok SDS contained a particularly detailed system of tasks and indicators, presented in a separate table with target values for the years 2010, 2015, 2020, and 2030. These included participatory indicators such as the number of events and participants, as well as indicators related to education, investment, environmental protection, agriculture, cultural heritage, civic engagement, and job creation.

The progress report reused that indicator table, adding data for the year 2013. Out of 16 indicators, 9 showed progress exceeding planned levels, two remained under study, and only one demonstrated insufficient dynamics. Overall, the report concluded that substantial progress had been made.

A SWOT analysis was also applied to assess strategy implementation. A comparison with the 2010 SWOT analysis revealed positive changes in several positions related to opportunities and weaknesses. Our experience confirms that a SWOT analysis is a promising and accessible tool for evaluating sustainable territorial development, particularly in community-based settings, as it relies on locally-known facts and supports meaningful discussion rather than abstract evaluation exercises.

In addition to quantitative indicators and the SWOT analysis, the progress report relied heavily on narrative assessments, including descriptions of completed actions, implemented projects, and key local events. Such narrative approaches are typical of Belarusian local strategies and often constitute the primary source of information on their effectiveness. Storytelling facilitates direct communication, conveys local pride and motivation, and helps build trust within communities.

Fieldwork conducted in Belarus and Ukraine between 2002 and 2022 shows that storytelling has been used throughout all stages of sustainable development processes, from education and analysis to planning, implementation, and monitoring, alongside other methodological tools. These narrative elements were incorporated into both strategy texts, as well as popular-science and methodological publications (see e.g., Sivagrakau, 2007, p. 272).

Researchers have identified storytelling as an essential component of sustainable development work and community engagement. Their study (Lowery et al., 2020)

summarises a wide range of literature sources, deriving from which makes it possible to draw sound conclusions on this issue (see Text Box 1).

Text Box 1

A number of important past offensives have been made in the past and are currently working on the sustainable development of the territorial and caruncle suppositories that are offensive:

- “Actors tell stories to garner support for proposed developments, influence public understanding, and mobilise stakeholders” (p. 1).
- “The meanings and perspectives of local residents are central for articulating SD goals and strategies that consider local contexts while aligning with global imperatives like climate action and gender equity” (p. 1).
- “... Rural communities have used storytelling to convey the value of assets that are often overlooked in provincial development discourse, as well as intangible resources like cultural heritage that are difficult to measure quantitatively” (p. 7).

Source: Lowery et al., 2020.

In our many years of work on the sustainable development of local territories, we have repeatedly encountered elements of storytelling in our communications with local communities, experts, municipal employees, and NGO members. We provide some examples of such narratives/evaluations of sustainable development work in Text Box 2.

Text Box 2

In the town of Dzisna, Belarus, it has recently been estimated that the resources allocated to improvements, education of the population, additional income for residents from tourism, and other projects within the framework of LA21 have exceeded the city budget in the last two years. ...Once the mayor of the town of Ciechocinek in Poland said that holding about 50 all-Polish festivals, competitions, congresses, and conferences per year triples the local budget. In the Berlin district of Marzan, Germany, in response to the question “How did you achieve such beauty of green spaces and improvements?” they replied that the district greening department is actively writing applications for projects and increasing its budget fivefold!

Source: Sivagrakau, 2008, p. 92.

Without recalling exact references, we draw on opinions from various sources, including well-known eco- and social activists, as well as experts in local territorial development, who emphasised the importance of storytelling in working with local communities. They pointed to the “power of storytelling” as a means of “building bridges” between participants in local development processes and fostering better mutual understanding and cooperation. It was also noted that engaging conversations can strengthen local identity and sustainability, and that storytelling constitutes an essential tool within the broader toolkit for sustainable territorial development.

The validity of our approaches – representing only a small part of the broader, multifaceted efforts of numerous organisations and individuals worldwide – was

later confirmed by academic research. For example, Canadian scholars describe sustainability indicators and storytelling as complementary lenses that help bridge knowledge and action in sustainability transitions. They also propose storytelling as an effective alternative approach for mobilising rural communities, which enables them to recognise local assets and pursue their own sustainability visions across diverse contexts.

Returning to the case of the town of Žaludok, elements of storytelling are clearly present in the *Progress Report* through descriptions of activities, projects, and events, illustrating positive dynamics in the community's movement towards sustainable development. These include the establishment of a seniors' club, the publication of a local history brochure, the organisation of cultural events such as a sculpture plein air and a flower festival, the expansion of separate waste collection infrastructure, and educational study visits to several European countries.

Three years after the publication of the *Progress Report*, the *Strategy for Sustainable Development of the Žaludocka-Orleŭski Region* further documented achievements in sustainable development, including the creation of an ecotourism cluster, support for local entrepreneurship, and infrastructure development, reflecting the continued momentum of local initiatives.

The use of SWOT analysis in sustainability assessments often leads to the refinement of territorial strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, enabling the identification of new development priorities and more effective policy adjustments. During the preparation of the *Progress Report* for Žaludok the final SWOT table was expanded. Newly identified weaknesses included the lack of territorial branding, low civic and youth engagement, and insufficient modern catering infrastructure. Key opportunities comprised the development of local crafts, agroecotourism, agricultural production and processing, cultural and sports events, the creation of health and information centres, population activation, and the development of a territorial brand.

Following the results of a new stage of situation analysis and the assessment of the implementation of the SD strategy in the Žaludok region, an additional paragraph – titled “Additions and changes to the general provisions of the Strategy” – appeared in the 2014 brochure. In it, a team of local activists confirmed their commitment to the principles of sustainable development, recording the addition of two strategic objectives: 1) on the development of the housing and the communal services sector and infrastructure; and 2) on energy efficiency and energy-saving.

The *Progress Report* also emphasises the need to expand activities in several priority areas. These include initiatives to preserve cultural diversity through the revival of traditional clothing, games, and folk practices; a historical and ethnographic expedition organised jointly with the Belarusian State University; the establishment of a youth leisure and volunteer centre; and efforts to grant Žaludok the status of a museum town, highlighting its multicultural heritage, including co-operation with the Embassy of the State of Israel in Belarus. Additional priorities include the development of targeted support programmes for small businesses and

the creation of a non-profit organisation to ensure the long-term implementation and sustainability of the strategy.

The development of a progress report on the SD strategy in the town of Žaludok was combined with a deeper development and reflection in the strategy of the issues of housing and communal services development, as well as the issues of energy-saving and energy efficiency². Owing to this, the SD strategy of the Žaludok county was supplemented with an analysis of the development of the housing sector and infrastructure, energy-saving and energy efficiency, new relevant indicators, and a separate paragraph on the partnership of the public and the authorities. The new additional materials in the strategy included: a draft of the “Comprehensive Programme for Energy-Saving and Improving the Efficiency of the Housing, Communal, and Social Sectors for the Period up to 2020”; a list of publications about the town of Žaludok and work on sustainable development; the composition of the Public Council on Housing, Energy-Saving, and Energy Efficiency; maps of the village council; and a number of other useful and interesting materials.

The case of the Zalessie village

The Sustainable Development Strategy for the village of Zalessie (Shitikova et al, 2010), Smarhon district, Hrodna region, was developed and approved by the decision of the Zalessie village executive committee in 2009 and finalised and published in 2010 within the framework of the international project titled *Sustainable Development at the Local Level*, with the support of the European Union and the UNDP. It included a section titled “The Indicators of Sustainable Development of the Territory”, which created the basis for the subsequent assessment of the effectiveness of the strategy. Three groups of indicators were identified: economic (6 thematic groups with a total of 15 indicators); social (four thematic groups with 16 indicators), and environmental (four thematic groups with 13 indicators). The numerical values of the initial indicators and their planned or expected values in the future were not recorded in the publication of the strategy. Because of this, the possibilities for conducting a detailed assessment of the implementation of the strategy were limited.

The *Report on the Progress of the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Strategy of the Village of Zalessie* notes that this report is “the result of collective

² This was made possible owing to the participation of the Žaludok Rural Executive Committee in the international project titled “Developing the Sustainability Potential of the Housing Sector – Promoting Effective Governance at Different Levels in the Republic of Belarus”, which was implemented in 2012–2014 within the framework of the European Commission’s “Citizens’ Associations and Local Governments: Partnership for Development” programme. The project was partially funded by the European Union. The lead partner of the project in Belarus was the International Public Association “Ecoproject”, and in Germany – the “Housing in Eastern Europe” Initiative (Berlin).

creativity, based on state-private and public partnership. During the preparation of the Report, public meetings and working meetings were held with the participation of interested villagers, deputies, representatives of state and public organisations, and local business. At public meetings and meetings with the participation of experts, the monitoring and evaluation of LA21³ in Zalesie village was carried out. The villagers assessed the level of solving the tasks set in the Strategy, discussed the difficulties that hinder their successful solution, and specified the further plan of joint actions”. This is followed by brief information about the village and the SDST, its priorities, and important components. It is noted that “the factors that allowed achieving the successful solution of some of the strategic tasks set in Zalesie included:

- the presence of proactive local leaders and active villagers;
- mutually beneficial public and private-public partnerships;
- the creation of public organisations, initiatives for various population groups, and the development of their organisational potential;
- the presence of support for public initiatives by local private businesses, various organisations, and clergy”.

The document also lists the principles for implementing the Zalesie strategy as well as includes photos of meetings of local public organisations and initiatives, a map of the tourist route, and materials on cooperation with foreign partners.

One of the indicators of the success of the implementation of the Zalesie SURT in the brochure is the dynamics of the number of public organisations and initiatives. It is noted that their number increased from three in 2009 to ten by the end of 2013. Moreover, it is characteristic that the organisations that existed at the beginning of the work on sustainable rural development were entirely state-public (the primary organisation of the Belarusian Union of Women, the Council of Veterans, and the primary organisation of the public association “Belaya Rus”). Such organisations are sometimes called State Non-Governmental Organisations (SNGOs).⁴

Among the new public structures, we can see independent local organisations and initiatives: the Local Charitable Foundation Northern Athens of M. K. Aginsky the Initiative Group for LA21, and the School Business Company at the Zalesie Nursery-Kindergarten-Secondary School.

The *Report* also includes a table called “Population Dynamics of the Village of Zalesie,” which reveals both positive trends (an increase in the number of residents and birth rate) and negative trends (high mortality rates).

A dedicated section of the brochure addresses progress in tourism development, reflecting its role in Zalesie as a key driver of socioeconomic development with cross-cutting economic, social, and environmental impacts. Progress

³ LA21 – Local Agenda 21 – this is the name given to local initiatives in the field of sustainable development after the Summit on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, where the action programme for the goals of SD for the 21st century – Agenda 21 – was adopted.

⁴ This is a specific phenomenon in the sociopolitical landscape of some countries. We provide a brief description of them in Annex B.

is demonstrated through indicators such as local festivals, the establishment of a local developmental fund, the initiation of manor and park restoration, educational activities, project implementation, expert collaboration, and the development of tourist routes. Additional initiatives include the formation of an agro-ecotourism council in the Smarhon district, efforts to create a tourism cluster, the adoption of the Ecotourism Development Strategy for the Southern Athens destination, partnership events, support for school-based tourism enterprises, and the opening of new agritourism farms. Overall, many of these indicators extend beyond tourism and reflect broader systemic dimensions of sustainable rural development.

The Zalesie report documents progress across economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. In the economic sphere, key achievements include the establishment of the Rural Social and Business Centre Zalesie Talaka the launch of entrepreneurship education at the local school, youth study tours, a women's business ideas fair supported by the MATRA programme of the Embassy of the Netherlands in Belarus, and ongoing efforts to create a historical and cultural tourism cluster.

Social progress over four years included the construction of cooperative housing for young families, the formation of women's and volunteer organisations (including a local group of the Belarusian Red Cross Society), the development of local media resources, capacity-building seminars, support for cultural initiatives, playground improvements, and the regular organisation of traditional festivals.

Environmental achievements comprised river clean-up activities, the commissioning of drinking water treatment facilities, environmental education initiatives, landscaping and tree planting, waste management planning, and the preparation of a mini-hydropower project. Overall, the *Progress Report* concludes that the achieved results enabled the refinement of priorities and the adjustment of the action plan for the subsequent implementation period.

Unlike the main strategy document, the action plan specified quantitative implementation indicators. In the tourism sector, these included the creation of three additional agritourism farms, the implementation of five promotional projects, the establishment of two parking areas, the development of at least twenty souvenir products and three sales points, and the achievement of an annual tourist flow of 12,000 visitors. Indicators for economic, social, and environmental development were also defined, although without explicit numerical targets.

The continuation of the Zalesie case is associated with the participation of village activists in another sustainable development project: in 2015–2017, the Zalesie Village Council joined forces with the Kreva Village Council within the framework of an international project⁵, which resulted in the development and publication of their joint strategy.

⁵ The international technical assistance project "Expanding Economic Opportunities in Rural Belarus" was implemented by the New Eurasia Foundation with funding from the European

The first part of the strategy, entitled “Progress Towards Sustainable Development”, presents not only a list of achievements and successes in sustainable rural development, but also comparative assessments and, in some cases, an analysis of the factors behind these successes. It is noted, for example, that Zalesse became one of the national leaders in developing and implementing local sustainable development strategies, serving as a model for other cities and villages in Belarus. The active involvement of local residents is also highlighted as a driver of broader processes, including the restoration of the Oginski manor and park complex, while the diversity of local civic initiatives is described as comparable to that of some district centres. Festivals, fairs, and public celebrations are emphasised as important stimulators of socioeconomic activity and improvements in the local social and business climate.

The new strategy incorporated lessons learnt from earlier initiatives. Tasks and indicators for sustainable development in the Zaleski and Kreuski village councils were consolidated in a single table, with most indicators specified for the years 2010, 2013, 2015, 2020, and 2030. This table closely resembles the one used in the 2010 Strategy for Sustainable Development of the Žaludok county, indicating the diffusion of successful practices across Belarusian territories. As in the Žaludok case, participatory indicators were included, such as the number of public and educational events, their participants, and the representation of different population groups. Other indicators were adapted from earlier experience, including the “share of ecologically clean products in agricultural production” to reflect progress in sustainable agriculture and land use.

With regard to the preservation of historical and cultural heritage as well as job creation, the strategy notes that separate action plans in these areas are to be developed in the near future.

Overall, the Žaludocki and Zaleski cases provide extensive empirical material, whose synthesis will be presented at the end of this section, following the analysis of other examples of SDST effectiveness assessments found in repeated strategy publications.

The cases of the city of Čavusy (with Čavusy district) and the villages of Orlia, Zdzitava, and Sporava

The following three examples, based on which we will analyse the approaches of local communities to assessing their sustainable development strategies, involve the city of Čavusy and the Čavusy district of the Mahiliou region, the villages of Zdzitava and Sporava in the Brest region, and the town of Orlia in the Shchuchyn district of the Hrodna region.

There are three publications on Čavusy, which can be used to determine the methodology and tools for such an assessment. The first one is the brochure titled

Chausy – mesto, kuda khochet-sya vernut'sya Mestnaya povestka na XXI vek dlya goroda Chausy i Chauskogo rayona [further in text referred to as: *Chausy – a place where you want to return. Local agenda for the 21st century for the city of Chausy and the Chausy district*] (Matyulin, et al. 2010, p. 52, published in 2010. The second one is the Supplement (Matyulin et al., 2014) to the main text of the strategy, which was published in 2014. The third one is the revised, updated strategy for the sustainable development of this territory, published in 2016 (Pakhomenko et al., 2016).

The first Čavusy Strategy includes a table of indicators intended for the annual assessment of the effectiveness of the implementation of the Local Agenda 21. It proposes 38 indicators, 16 of which have fixed values for 2010. These indicators are distributed across social and participatory (18), environmental (14), and economic (5) dimensions. Among them are several original measures, such as the number of young medical professionals and teachers remaining in their positions after the mandatory distribution period, the number of cyclists observed at a specific intersection on selected weekdays, and the number of residents able to identify the official and unofficial symbols of the town of Čavusy during a street survey.

The publication also contains a SWOT analysis – based on population surveys and seminars – assessing the district's potential. Notably, the strategy text incorporates the region's fairy tales and legends, while the vision of the desired future – presented under the lyrical title “Chausy – a place where you want to return” – occupies a substantial part of the brochure.

In the 2014 publication, described simultaneously as an appendix and a report, elements of the evaluation of the first strategy are limited. While a population decline is noted, further development of the district centre based on local industry and public services is mentioned without quantitative indicators. The document primarily focuses on future plans and forecasts, and introduces nineteen additional indicators, largely related to housing and communal services, energy-saving, and energy efficiency. A new SWOT analysis is presented, but it is narrowly focused on these sectors and is not compared with the previous SWOT results.

The third Čavusy publication (2016) is devoted to analysing the implementation of the previous strategy and developing a new vision of the future. The assessment is provided mainly through narrative descriptions of achievements, supplemented by selected quantitative data, including demographic indicators. For the first time among Belarusian local strategies, the Čavusy Strategy frames district development through the lens of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, linking local actions with global challenges. This approach expands the scope of assessment and can be recommended as an additional evaluative element for other territories.

The strategy of the Orleŭski village council was developed by a local initiative group with the support of experts in 2009 and approved by the Orleŭski village executive committee. It included a table with a number of original indicators, divided into six parts⁶:

⁶ The style and punctuation features of the indicator group names have been preserved.

- (1) The assessment of the quality of life (including the number of residents who report an improvement in the quality of life in their communities [according to survey data]; improvement in health indicators [incidence rate, cases per 1,000 working-age population]; improvement in the quality of drinking water [according to survey data]; average income [salary]);
- (2) Let's make our region clean, beautiful, and comfortable for life! (including: a separate collection and disposal of garbage [%]; the amount of household waste taken to landfill [ton]; the demolition of empty emergency houses [units]; the reduction of the amount of garbage in the forest near the settlement [expert assessment]; reconstructed parks and family recreation areas with playgrounds [number, area]; sports grounds [number, area]; strengthened banks of cleared reservoirs [length, meters]);
- (3) We are developing the traditional and creating a new economy of the region! (including the number of farms that use environmentally-friendly food production technologies; the development of tourist services; an increase in the flow of tourists; revived ethno-ecological management technologies; the creation of institutions [mechanisms] to support small and medium-sized businesses [business incubator, mutual credit society]; exhibitions and sales of products by local artisans; schools for apprentices; the number of small businesses and individual entrepreneurs);
- (4) Let's increase the popularity and attractiveness of our region! (the production of maps, guidebooks, advertising booklets; developed tourist routes; the development and promotion of the brand; the number of events [festivals, exhibitions, competitions]);
- (5) Together we act for sustainable development (inclusion of the LA21 micro-region in the district development plan; the number of initiative groups, clubs; the number of groups developing individual areas of LA21; the number of LA21 activist groups; the number of clear leaders in individual areas who are able to independently solve issues; the number of LA21 projects; the number of specific changes in the community [information stand, equipped beach, mini-market, village council map]; the creation of a centre for the sustainable development of the local community; the number of protected natural, historical, and cultural heritage sites; the organisation of leisure activities for children and youth [the number of clubs, sports sections]; the development of a concept for the latest technologies in heat supply, electricity supply, and water use);
- (6) We continue to learn about sustainable development and share our experience (increasing the awareness of local residents on the topic of SD and LA21 [the number of information events]; the number of educational events [seminars, internships]; the number of specialists who regularly come to the settlement or district to conduct seminars, round tables, trainings; the number of local communities in Belarus and abroad with whom contacts have been established; the number of publications and media publications on LA21).

The indicator table records the numerical figures for this indicator for 2010 and 2015.

Unfortunately, the Sustainable Development Strategy of the Žaludocka-Orleŭski county (Tsyvinsky et al., 2017), which was developed and published in 2017, does not contain an analysis of the achievement of the indicators of the Orlia Strategy 2009, and only for some of those indicators is there information on the general territory of the Žaludocka-Orleŭski county. To assess the effectiveness of sustainable development, a repeated SWOT analysis (but this time joint for the Žaludok and Orlia territories) was also used. Based on it, a conclusion was drawn about positive changes in local development: “It is important that we see how some of our weaknesses are shrinking over time and how our opportunities and strengths are expanding”. We can also see in this strategy some storytelling about the implemented projects and achievements in the work on the sustainable development of the territory.

The history of work on sustainable development in the villages of Zdzitava and Sporava, Biaroza district, Brest region, began in 2007, when the Zdzitava school launched a long-term project called “School Local Agenda 21”. In 2009–2010, village activists worked on the first local sustainable development strategy, which was published in 2010 under the title *School + Village Together for Sustainable Development. Local Agenda 21 of the Village of Zdzitava of the Sporava Village Council* (Zhukovich et al., 2010). This strategy contains a table of indicators of the sustainable development of the local community (17 indicators); for some of them, numerical values of indicators for 2007 and 2010 as well as forecasts for 2015 and 2020 are recorded. The results of the SWOT analysis are also published. Verbal descriptions of the situation and plans for the future are also given. Among them are interesting and instructive stories of entrepreneurship in the territory of the village council; a separate paragraph in the strategy is devoted to them, which can be considered as a fixation of indicators and examples of past years, which can now be a reference point for new actions as well as a source of inspiration for new generations of villagers. Among these stories are examples of not only the production and commercial success of local residents, but also participation in the social development of the village. Thus, from the memoirs of a local resident, Nikolai Zhukovich, we can learn that local entrepreneur Mikhail Danilkevich built an extension to his house for a school with the money he had earned in trade: a teacher’s room and two rooms for lessons.

In 2017, the book *Sporava + Zdzitava: Together for Sustainable Development (The Socioeconomic Development Strategy of the Sporava Village Council)* was published (Babitsky et al., 2017). It lists the achievements of the territory on the path to sustainable development (including materials on international projects implemented in the local community), as well as publishes a table of priorities and development plans of the village council with indicators for 2017 and 2030 (which partially overlap with the indicators of the 2010 strategy). There is also an assessment of the implementation of the previous strategy using SWOT analysis data. Thus, it is noted

that now “we can state the fact that some points of the SWOT analysis conducted at that time [2010 – A. S.] have moved from the category of *weaknesses* to *strengths*. For the first time among local sustainable development strategies, the paragraph ‘Climate change and its impact on the territory of the Sporava village council’ is highlighted here. This is an example of taking into account current problems of the present in local strategies and during their evaluation.”

Conclusions

Thus, a summary of the materials on the assessment of local sustainable development strategies in Belarus allows us to distinguish five types of them:

- (1) a list of achievements for the period (storytelling);
- (2) evaluation by indicators (including numerical evaluation);
- (3) evaluation through a comparison of SWOT analysis results;
- (4) benchmarking, or evaluation against other criteria or examples;
- (5) an analysis of the reasons for success or failure.

Based on the use of these and other assessments, general conclusions are drawn and recommendations are suggested for the next steps in sustainable development activities. A graphical representation of the system of assessment methods for both work on sustainable development of territories in general and its individual elements (eg., local sustainable development strategies) is shown in Figure 1.3.

For each group of defined assessments, different approaches, variations, and emphases are possible. We do not consider it necessary to require that all participants in the assessment process use all five of these groups. At the same time, there is no reason to limit the list of possible assessment groups to only these five, since search and creativity in this matter can bear good fruits.

Above, we have considered in some detail the advantages of describing achievements and storytelling. Here we can only add that a possible beginning of such a story can include answers to questions (for example: “What problems have we solved?”), an assessment of the vision of the desired future recorded in the strategy, or an assessment of the adopted priorities for the development of the territory and the local community. For group 2 (Assessment by indicators), it should be borne in mind that verbal assessments, assessments using symbols, and digital assessments (absolute and comparative) are possible here. In group 3 (Assessment by comparing the results of the SWOT analysis), various approaches are also possible, eg., recording the overcoming of negative aspects and the implementation of the tasks indicated in the “Opportunities” section. In group 4 (Benchmarking), the following can be used as a basis for comparison:

- indicators and digital indicators of the development of similar territories (districts, cities, villages);
- indicators of standards or other territorial development indicators established by law;

- elements of the UN Sustainable Development Goals for the period up to 2030;
- principles or criteria developed by international⁷ or national⁸ organisations.

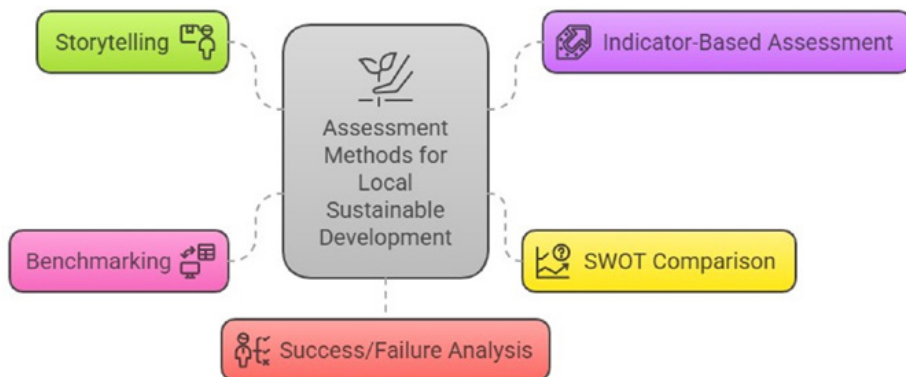


Figure 1.3. System of methods for assessing sustainable development at the local level
Source: own elaboration.

Table 1.7 summarises the information about the cases analysed in the first parts of the article.

The table shows that the main types of the assessment of local sustainable development strategies in Belarusian cases include: 1) the list of achievements for the period (storytelling); 2) general conclusions and recommendations for assessment. Such assessments are available in all reporting and assessment materials. As for the other types of assessments, the picture is, as they say, mixed, but in general, in most cases, local sustainable development teams or experts used other types of assessments.

Monitoring and evaluation activities also serve promotional functions. In Zalessie, the *Progress Report* contributed to place branding through the presentation of local symbols, landscape imagery, and historical references, including memoirs by Kanstancin Tyškievič, highlighting Zalessie's historical role as a centre of social and intellectual exchange. Additional contextual information is provided in the Strategy for Sustainable Development of the Žaludocka-Orleŭski County, which outlines the natural, cultural, social, and economic potential of the territory. Its appendices include historical materials on the Tyzenhauz magnate family, Valeryŭ Vrubleŭski and regional events such as the campaigns of Charles XII during the

⁷ For example, the European Sustainable Development Network (ESDN) Office has identified 7 principles and governance challenges that should be addressed by SD policies in general, and by SD strategies in particular, <https://www.esdn.eu/about/basics-of-sd-strategies>.

⁸ Developed by the German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE), the German Sustainability Code (DNK) has been supporting companies in sustainability reporting since 2011 (<https://www.deutscher-nachhaltigkeitskodex.de/>).

Table 1.7. The availability of elements for assessing the effectiveness of local sustainable development strategies in *Progress Reports* and in reissues of strategies*

No.	Territory name	The list of achievements for the period (storytelling)	Indicator assessment	Digital assessment	Evaluation by comparing the results of the SWOT analysis	Evaluation against other criteria or examples	An analysis of the reasons for success or failure	General conclusions, evaluation recommendations
1	Žaludok	✓	✓	⦿	✓	⦿	⦿	✓
2	Zalessie	✓	⦿	✗	✗	✗	⦿	⦿
3	Čavuski district	✓	⦿	⦿	✗	✓	⦿	✓
4	Orlia	✓	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	⦿	✓
5	Zdzitava and Sporava	✓	⦿	⦿	✓	⦿	✓	✓

* Explanation: ✓ – available; ✗ – absent; ⦿ – partially available.

Source: own elaboration.

Great Northern War (1700–1721), thereby strengthening the local identity and the informational value of the monitoring outputs.

Progress reports, as well as other evaluation documents or parts of documents, had positive effects also because, owing to them, those who made such analytical generalisations usually noticed errors in the SDSTs that created problems for the evaluation. For example, this concerned the lack of recorded quantitative values of indicators, relative both to the initial baseline situation and to planned tasks or forecast estimates. As a result, it can be observed – eg., for the Zalessie case – that more specific indicators and numerical figures appeared in the plans updated based on the analysis of the strategy implementation.

2. Research methodology and approaches to evaluating local strategies

2.1. A review of approaches and tools for the evaluation of the effectiveness of local sustainable development strategies

Based on the literature review from Section 1, this study identified several approaches and models for assessing local sustainable development strategies, each with distinct characteristics and applications.

Self-assessment and participatory frameworks

The Self-Assessment Tool for Sustainable Local Development (SAT4SLD) is one of the most comprehensive approaches explicitly designed for Eastern Europe and Central Asia. This three-stage framework includes: 1) a situation analysis examining the current status across the local government, community, the private sector, and environment domains; 2) problem identification through stakeholder engagement and SWOT analysis; and 3) asset-based monitoring using locally defined indicators (*Self-Assessment Tool for Sustainable Local Development*, n.d.).

Similarly, the Self-Assessment Tool for Sustainable Urban Development (SAT4SUD) and the Self-Assessment Tool for Territorial and Local Development (SAT4TER) provide structured approaches for local authorities to evaluate their development strategies through comprehensive statement-based assessments covering strategy design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation (*SAT4SUD – Self-Assessment Tool for Sustainable Urban Development Strategies*, n.d.; *SAT4TER – Self-Assessment Tool for Territorial and Local Development Strategies*, n.d.).

Participatory evaluation approaches

Participatory evaluation emerges as a fundamental approach that actively involves stakeholders throughout the evaluation process. This methodology ensures inclusivity by engaging diverse perspectives from programme participants, staff, community members, and relevant groups through methods such as focus groups, community meetings, and surveys. The approach emphasises collaborative planning where stakeholders define evaluation scope, objectives, and key questions, ensuring that assessments address the most pertinent community concerns (Ochieng, 2024).

The bottom-up development approach complements participatory evaluation by placing local communities at the centre of the development process. This methodology involves communities in identifying their own development priorities, allocating resources, and implementing projects that meet their specific needs. The approach recognises that local communities possess the most comprehensive understanding of their challenges and opportunities (Isidiho & Sabran, 2016; Kirby et al., 2024).

Outcome-based assessment methods

Outcome harvesting provides an innovative evaluation approach that focuses on identifying and documenting outcomes without necessarily predicting them in advance. This method collects evidence of change and works backwards to assess how interventions contributed to these changes, making it particularly valuable for complex environments where outcomes are uncertain. The six-step process includes designing the harvest, gathering data, engaging stakeholders, substantiating outcomes, analysing and interpreting results, and supporting the use of findings (*Outcome Harvesting*, 2017).

The Most Significant Change (MSC) technique involves collecting personal accounts of change and determining which are most significant through systemic stakeholder selection processes. Rather than focusing on predefined indicators, the MSC method captures stories of change from beneficiaries and stakeholders, providing insights into how and why changes occurred. This approach is particularly practical for programmes where outcomes cannot be precisely predicted beforehand (*Most Significant Change*, n.d.).

Indicator-based assessment systems

The SMART indicators (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) provide a structured approach to measuring progress towards sustainable development goals at the local level. The methodology emphasises developing indicators that are directly relevant to local policymakers while maintaining global coherence (*Measuring, Monitoring and Evaluating the SDGs*, n.d.). Local indicator frameworks typically include context indicators (describing the operating environment), input indicators (resources used), output indicators (direct results of activities), and impact indicators (long-term changes) (*Local indicators for the 2030 agenda (sustainable development goals)*, n.d.).

The Logic Models and the Theory of Change frameworks offer complementary approaches for strategy assessment. Logic models describe the logical sequence of inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes. At the same time, theories of change explain the underlying assumptions and causal mechanisms that justify why particular actions will bring about the desired results. The Theory of Change approaches work backwards from the desired outcomes to identify appropriate interventions,

while logic models work forward from resources through activities to results (*Theory of Change and Logic Models*, n.d.).

Multi-stakeholder engagement models

Stakeholder engagement frameworks provide systemic approaches to involving all relevant parties in strategy development and assessment. The AA1000 Stakeholder Engagement Standard offers a globally recognised framework built upon the principles of inclusivity, materiality, and responsiveness (Le Roy, 2024). This approach emphasises the importance of identifying and prioritising stakeholder groups based on their interest and influence, and then engaging them through appropriate consultation methods (Wai et al., 2018).

Community-led local development (CLLD) is a specific model emphasising local participation in strategy design and implementation. This approach requires active involvement of representative cross-sections of local communities in strategy preparation, with processes designed to build consensus, manage conflict, and foster new links between sectors and groups.

Developmental and adaptive evaluation

Developmental evaluation provides an approach particularly suited to complex, uncertain environments where traditional evaluation methods may be insufficient. This methodology supports innovation development by providing real-time feedback to programme staff, facilitating continuous adaptation to emergent realities. Developmental evaluation is especially valuable for addressing the complex, multi-stakeholder nature of sustainable development initiatives (*Developmental Evaluation*, n.d.).

Integrated assessment approaches

Multi-method assessment frameworks combine various evaluation approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of strategy effectiveness. These integrated approaches recognise that no single methodology can capture all aspects of the sustainable development impact, requiring a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, participatory and expert-driven approaches, as well as formative and summative evaluation techniques (Pallaske, 2024).

The selection of appropriate assessment approaches is contingent on various factors, including the complexity of the development context (Pertoldi et al., 2022), stakeholder engagement requirements (*Participatory Evaluation. How to Implement It*, n.d.; Sharifi, 2016), the availability of predefined indicators (Gillespie-Marthaler et al., 2019), and the specific learning objectives of the evaluation process (Potter, 2008).

Indeed, successful assessments frequently integrate diverse approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of strategy effectiveness and community

impact. The extant evidence suggests that these approaches offer significant methodological advantages. Merritt and colleagues (2022) posited that integrated assessment (IA) has the potential to mitigate the issue of “silo thinking” in community interventions. Hamilton and colleagues (2019) demonstrated that IA frameworks have the capacity to elucidate the interactions between social, market, environmental, and institutional processes. However, the empirical validation of these findings is still emerging. Ahner-McHaffie and colleagues (2018) revealed that out of 601 integrated intervention evaluations, only 26 used designs capable of detecting synergistic effects, and only 7 showed definitive synergies.

The limitations of the existing evaluation approaches and rationale for the adopted methodology

Despite the growing sophistication of evaluation tools applied to local sustainable development strategies, the reviewed approaches reveal several persistent limitations. Many evaluation frameworks remain predominantly expert-driven, indicator-centred, or procedurally-oriented, prioritising formal accountability over the lived experience of local communities. Participatory elements are frequently incorporated in a declarative manner, while residents’ perspectives are often reduced to consultation inputs rather than treated as a central analytical reference point.

Indicator-based systems, while offering comparability and technical rigour, tend to privilege what is easily measurable over what is socially meaningful. As a result, dimensions such as dignity, agency, trust, a sense of influence, or perceived fairness of development processes are rarely captured in a systemic way. Conversely, narrative and storytelling-based approaches provide a valuable insight into local meanings and experiences but are often criticised for their limited comparability and methodological standardisation when used in isolation.

Integrated assessment frameworks seek to overcome these weaknesses by combining multiple methods; however, empirical evidence shows that a truly synergistic integration remains rare, and many applications continue to reproduce sectoral or methodological silos. Moreover, the existing approaches rarely differentiate evaluation tools according to the capacities, roles, and expectations of different stakeholder groups, assuming a uniform level of analytical competence and engagement across residents, local officials, and experts.

The methodological approach adopted in this study is a direct response to these limitations. It is grounded in the assumption that an effective evaluation of local sustainable development strategies requires: 1) placing rural inhabitants at the centre of the analytical framework; 2) combining quantitative indicators with qualitative, experience-based assessment; and 3) differentiating evaluative instruments according to stakeholder roles. Rather than treating participation as an auxiliary component of evaluation, the proposed approach conceptualises it as a constitutive element of effectiveness itself.

In this sense, the adopted methodology does not replace the existing evaluation approaches but builds upon them selectively, integrating their strengths while addressing their conceptual and practical shortcomings. This provides the foundation for a resident-centred, multidimensional, and operational framework capable of linking theoretical coherence with empirical applicability.

The methodological approach adopted in this study should therefore be understood not as an attempt to replace the existing evaluation frameworks, but as a complementary perspective that foregrounds residents' experiential knowledge. By combining structured quantitative assessments with open-ended qualitative inquiry, the study seeks to capture both measurable outcomes and socially meaningful processes. This choice reflects the assumption that the effectiveness of local strategies cannot be fully assessed without accounting for how they are perceived, interpreted, and enacted by those who live within their consequences.

2.2. The principal assumptions behind the research approach

Evaluation as accountability versus evaluation as learning

The evaluation of local sustainable development strategies can serve fundamentally different purposes, which significantly shape both the design of assessment tools and the interpretation of results. A dominant tradition in policy evaluation treats assessment primarily as an instrument of accountability, focusing on compliance with predefined objectives, the efficient use of resources, and measurable outputs. In this logic, evaluation functions as a control mechanism, oriented towards external reporting, benchmarking, and the justification of public expenditure.

While accountability-oriented evaluation is necessary, it is insufficient for capturing the complex, processual, and community-embedded nature of local sustainable development. Such approaches tend to prioritise formal indicators and expert judgements, often overlooking informal learning processes, adaptive capacity, and locally-perceived meanings of success or failure.

In contrast, evaluation for learning conceptualises assessment as a reflective and iterative process aimed at improving strategies, strengthening local capacities, and supporting collective sense-making. Within this paradigm, evaluation is not limited to judging outcomes *ex post* but becomes an integral component of development itself, facilitating feedback, adjustment, and institutional learning. Learning-oriented evaluation recognises local actors not merely as objects of measurement but as co-producers of knowledge about development processes.

The research approach adopted in this study aligns explicitly with the evaluation-for-learning paradigm. By prioritising resident perspectives, participatory reflection and differentiated assessment tools, the study treats evaluation as a mechanism for enhancing resilience, agency, and adaptive governance at the local level. Accountability remains an important function; however, it is embedded within a broader learning-oriented framework that emphasises improvement over control

and understanding over mere measurement. Our approach embodies several innovative principles, summarised briefly below.

The centrality of rural inhabitants

Our study situates the rural resident at the very core of the analysis. We endeavour to examine both the issues under consideration and the recommendations we formulate from the perspective of local inhabitants themselves, grounding our work (not merely taking into consideration) in their needs and conceptions of a dignified life. By contrast, the majority of researchers and experts approach the question of the effectiveness of rural sustainable development strategies either from the standpoint of “returns” (eg., at the national level, through GDP growth), or in an instrumental fashion (i.e., seeking to design a more or less adequate evaluative tool by which comparisons between countries may be made). Unlike such approaches, our principal emphasis falls on the interests and assessments of the residents themselves. A telling confirmation of this orientation’s validity came from one of our respondents, who remarked in a survey: “It is always important that people are heard.”

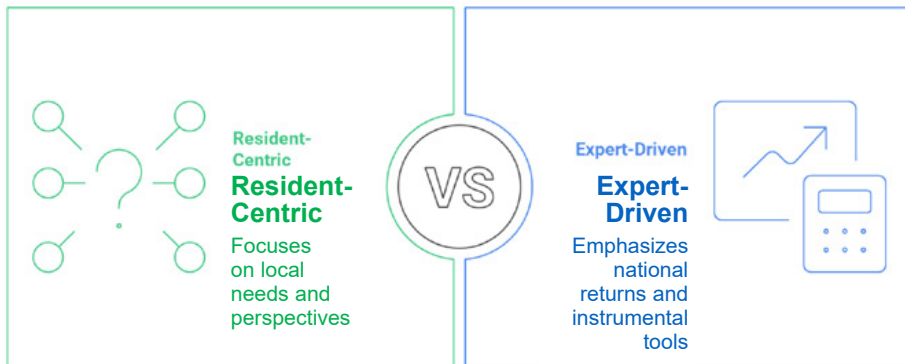


Figure 2.1. Prioritising the approach to local sustainable development

Source: own elaboration.

The statements from survey participants indicate that stakeholders seek not only consultation but also meaningful participation, advocating for a shift from formal consultation processes to substantive co-determination. This perspective supports the methodological decision to place rural inhabitants at the centre of the evaluation framework (see Text Box).

The Demand for Authentic Participation: Evidence from Stakeholders

"The greatest improvement to future strategies would be making resident participation mandatory and genuine at the strategy creation stage."

— Respondent 287 (Poland, resident)

"Consultations with residents are essential in the creation of strategies. Greater involvement of residents, entrepreneurs, and local authorities in strategy creation."

— Respondent 234 (Poland, resident)

"Local groups activity, social trust, and bottom-up structures are cited repeatedly as primary drivers of success."

— Representative finding (Belarus, multiple respondents)

"[Strategies need] legal guarantees that resident perspectives are embedded and enforceable in local strategy development."

— Synthesised from respondent expectations (both countries)

The differentiation of evaluative instruments

The framework proposes three differentiated assessment tools, each designed for specific audiences: a simplified Resident Tool emphasising accessible language and locally meaningful indicators; a Staff Tool for local government implementation and monitoring; and an Analytical Tool for comparative research and policy analysis. Thus, the methodologies and guidelines designed for local organisational staff and policymakers ought to differ both substantively and in format from those prepared for ordinary local residents. In the case of expert researchers who are concerned, for example, with international comparisons, the most appropriate option would be a distinct, detailed, analytically-oriented methodology – one that local residents would likely characterise as "overly complex and unsuitable." We initially formulated this proposition as a working hypothesis, and its validity was subsequently confirmed, not least by the persuasive results of a survey among approximately 400 respondents, the majority of whom may reasonably be classified as experts on the subject under study. As one of the first steps towards the practical implementation of our findings, we have prepared *Differentiated tools* for evaluating local strategies of sustainable development.

The unit of analysis and the levels of evaluation

A critical methodological issue in the evaluation of local sustainable development strategies concerns the clear definition of the unit of analysis and the levels at which an assessment is conducted. In the context of rural development, ambiguity in this respect often leads to methodological inconsistency, blurred interpretations of results, and difficulties in linking empirical findings to policy recommendations.



Figure 2.2. The selection of an appropriate methodology for the evaluation of local sustainable development strategies

Source: own elaboration.



Figure 2.3. Selecting tools for the evaluation of local sustainable development

Source: own elaboration.

In this study, the primary unit of analysis is the local sustainable development strategy as implemented within a specific rural territory, understood not merely as a formal policy document, but as a dynamic set of practices, interactions, decisions, and outcomes unfolding over time. Consequently, evaluation does not focus exclusively on declared objectives or written plans, but on how strategies are experienced, interpreted, and enacted by different groups of local actors.

Evaluation is conducted across three analytically distinct but interrelated levels. First, there is the individual level, which captures the perceptions, experiences, and assessments of rural residents as the ultimate beneficiaries and co-creators of local development processes. At this level, effectiveness is understood in terms of perceived improvements in the quality of life, dignity, participation, trust, and agency. Second, there is the organisational and institutional level, encompassing local authorities, municipal staff, community organisations, and implementation bodies responsible for strategy design, coordination, and execution. Here, evaluation focuses on governance quality, transparency, coordination capacity, learning mechanisms, and institutional adaptability. Third, there is the territorial level, which situates local strategies within broader spatial, socioeconomic, and environmental contexts, allowing for an assessment of structural conditions, spatial coherence, accessibility, and linkages between rural and urban systems.

Importantly, these levels are not treated as independent domains of analysis. Rather, the evaluation framework explicitly recognises their interdependence and mutual influence. Individual perceptions are shaped by institutional practices; institutional performance is conditioned by territorial constraints; and territorial outcomes are, in turn, affected by local agency and collective action. This multi-level perspective enables a more comprehensive and realistic assessment of strategy effectiveness, consistent with the systemic and process-oriented understanding of rural resilience adopted in this study.

The evaluation of local sustainable development strategies requires a clear conceptual distinction between effectiveness, efficiency, and impact, as these concepts refer to different dimensions of performance and are often conflated in both policy documents and empirical studies. Failure to distinguish between them may lead to misleading conclusions and inappropriate policy recommendations.

Effectiveness refers to the extent to which a local sustainable development strategy achieves its intended objectives. In this study, effectiveness is understood in a broad and multidimensional sense, encompassing not only the attainment of formally defined goals, but also perceived improvements in the quality of life, participation, trust, agency, and resilience, as experienced by local residents. Effectiveness thus captures whether a strategy “works” from the perspective of those directly affected by it.

Efficiency concerns the relationship between the resources used and the results achieved. It addresses the questions of cost-effectiveness, administrative capacity, and the optimal allocation of financial, human, and organisational resources. While efficiency is an important consideration for public policy – particularly in

accountability-oriented evaluations – it provides limited insight into the social legitimacy and lived relevance of development strategies when considered in isolation.

Impact refers to long-term, often indirect, and systemic changes attributable, at least partially, to the implementation of a strategy. Impact includes structural transformations in socioeconomic conditions, institutional arrangements, spatial patterns, and environmental outcomes. Unlike effectiveness, which may be assessed in relatively short timeframes, impact typically unfolds over extended periods and is influenced by multiple external factors, making causal attribution more complex.

The methodological framework adopted in this study prioritises effectiveness as the central evaluative category, while recognising the complementary roles of efficiency and impact. Efficiency considerations are incorporated primarily at the institutional level of analysis, whereas impact is addressed through the territorial and longitudinal perspective. This hierarchy reflects the study's normative commitment to resident-centred evaluation and its emphasis on learning, adaptation, and resilience rather than narrow performance optimisation.

Operationalising effectiveness in local sustainable development strategies

In order to ensure analytical clarity and empirical applicability, the concept of effectiveness in local sustainable development strategies is operationalised through a structured set of criteria linked to the five-dimensional framework adopted in this study. Rather than treating effectiveness as a single aggregate outcome, the evaluation framework conceptualises it as a composite and relational construct, reflecting how different dimensions of development are experienced, assessed, and interpreted by local stakeholders.

Effectiveness is operationalised across **five analytical dimensions**: social, economic, environmental, institutional, and spatial. Each dimension is assessed through a combination of quantitative indicators and qualitative, perception-based measures, allowing for triangulation between measurable outcomes and lived experience. This dual approach acknowledges that many core elements of rural resilience – such as trust, agency, participation, or perceived fairness – cannot be adequately captured through objective indicators alone.

Within each dimension, effectiveness is assessed using three complementary criteria.

First, **perceived relevance**, referring to the extent to which local strategies address issues that residents and stakeholders consider important for their quality of life and future prospects.

Second, **perceived change**, capturing whether the respondents observe tangible improvements or positive dynamics attributable to strategy implementation.

Third, **perceived process quality**, encompassing assessments of participation, transparency, inclusiveness, and responsiveness in the design and implementation of local strategies.

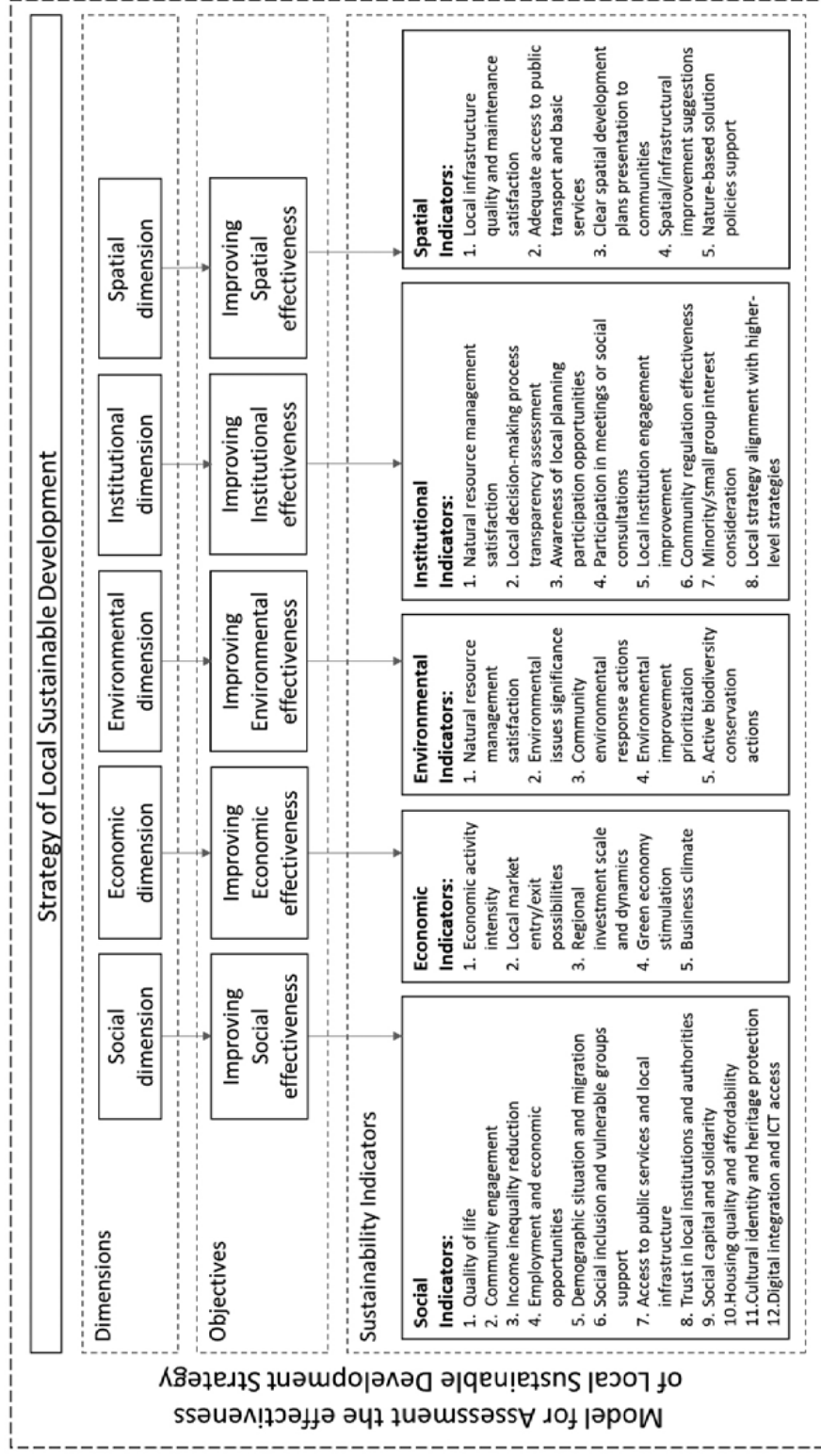


Figure 2.4. The conceptual model for evaluating the effectiveness of local sustainable development strategy

Source: own elaboration.

This operationalisation enables effectiveness to be analysed not only in terms of outcomes, but also as a function of process quality and as a contextual fit. By integrating residents' subjective evaluations with structured analytical dimensions, the framework supports the resident-centred and learning-oriented evaluation of local sustainable development strategies, consistent with the theoretical understanding of resilience as a dynamic and processual phenomenon.

2.3. The mixed-methods research approach

The research approach utilises a combination of diverse methods and tools, expanding both theoretical knowledge (the conceptual model) and empirical expertise (surveying). Figure 2.4 presents a novel conceptual model for evaluating the effectiveness of local sustainable development strategies.

The conceptual model of effectiveness evaluation

In the presented model for evaluating the effectiveness of local sustainable development strategies, its main components (dimensions) are closely interconnected. In the graphical representation of the model (Figure 2.4), we decided not to demonstrate these connections (as is often shown through a multitude of multidirectional arrows in similar models, where “everything is connected to everything”), since an additional multitude of arrows and connections, in our opinion, would only complicate the understanding of the model. To an even greater extent, there is a close connection, intersection, and potential for interpretation among sustainability indicators. Here, we will probably not be mistaken if we say that, in relation to any of the indicators given in the table, an argument can be made that it could be attributed to another category (dimension). For example, an economic indicator can be simultaneously interpreted as social or institutional. This, in our opinion, does not violate the model's general structure but only creates additional opportunities for its use in scientific and practical applications. Our research demonstrates that the use of the presented model for assessing the effectiveness of local sustainable development strategies can increase the regularity of such assessments, bring them closer to a holistic view of the object under study, and also contribute to greater consideration of local development features and their diversity.

Survey design and objectives

The survey questionnaire was designed as a structured form – administered online through a secure platform – to ensure accessibility to diverse respondent groups. The questionnaire comprised fifty-five items organised into several thematic sections. The first component of the study collected information on the respondents' backgrounds and roles in LDS processes. The second component examined the perceived effectiveness of local strategies. The third component involved

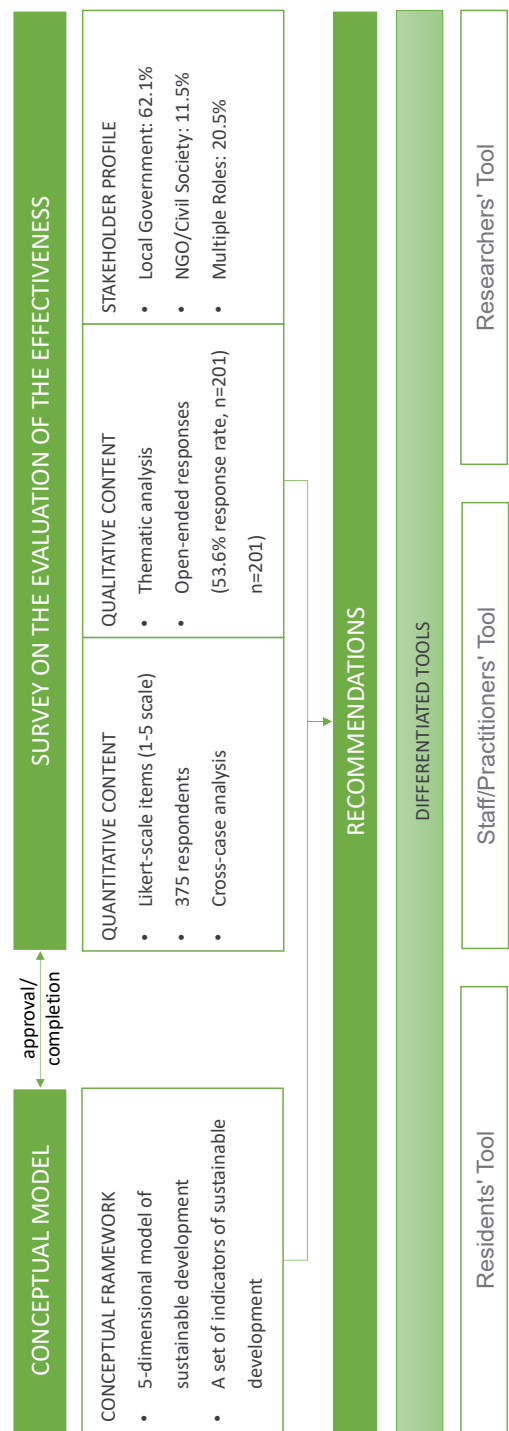


Figure 2.5. Research Methodology / Mixed-Methods Research Approach
Source: own elaboration.

quantitative ratings across five sustainability dimensions using a 5-point Likert scale. Finally, the fourth component of the study incorporated open-ended questions regarding success factors, challenges, and recommendations for improvements.

The five-dimensional assessment framework implemented in the survey constitutes a significant advancement in sustainable development evaluation. The social dimension, which includes thirteen indicators, assesses the quality of life, community engagement, social inclusion, and cultural identity, as confirmed by several independent studies (Steiner & Atterton, 2015; Suárez Roldan et al., 2023; Yusriadi & Andi Kaslin, 2025). The economic dimension consists of six indicators designed to evaluate economic activity, investment climate, and green economy initiatives, as previously investigated by researchers (Beltramo et al., 2024; Cagliero et al., 2011; Łacka et al., 2024; Sánchez-Sellero et al., 2021; Steiner & Atterton, 2015). The environmental dimension, also comprising six indicators, examines natural resources management, environmental priorities, and biodiversity actions, as supported by recent research (Beszedics-Jäger & Buzási, 2024; Gillespie-Marthaler et al., 2019; Łacka et al., 2024). The institutional dimension, which includes nine indicators, investigates governance, transparency, participation mechanisms, and multi-level coordination, also evidenced by research (Kapucu et al., 2024). Finally, the spatial dimension, comprising six indicators, addresses infrastructure quality, accessibility, and nature-based solutions (Pertoldi M et al., 2022).

The primary objectives of the survey were numerous – firstly, to present quantitative evidence regarding stakeholder perceptions of LDS effectiveness across multiple sustainability dimensions; secondly, to validate the theoretical foundations of the present study; and thirdly, to examine whether systemic differences exist in how various stakeholder groups evaluate local development initiatives. These objectives are expected to support the study's central hypothesis that community engagement is a critical requirement for the effective implementation of sustainable development strategies.

Statistical analysis. The study's representativeness was established through a statistical analysis of questionnaire results, utilising both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative analysis included descriptive statistics, comparative analysis across respondent groups, correlation analysis between dimensions, and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to assess statistically significant differences among stakeholder categories. The qualitative analysis of open-ended responses involved thematic coding to identify recurring patterns in success factors, barriers, and recommendations.

The visual representation of the research methodology appears in Figure 2.5.

3. The evaluation of local sustainable development strategies from a stakeholder viewpoint

3.1. Study sample characteristics

Survey implementation. This section conducts a thorough analysis of survey data collected from 375 stakeholders engaged in local sustainable development strategies (LDS) in Poland and Belarus. The survey, conducted between June and August 2025, represents a significant empirical contribution to understanding how different actors perceive the effectiveness of community-based approaches to sustainable development. The analysis examines five key dimensions of sustainability – social, economic, environmental, institutional, and spatial – reflecting the expanded framework proposed in this monograph, which extends beyond traditional triadic conceptualisations.

Sample composition and representativeness. The final analytical sample comprised 375 valid responses, with the majority originating from Poland (n=343, 91.5%) and a minor but significant representation from Belarus (n=32, 8.5%). The distribution of the respondents across stakeholder categories revealed significant patterns regarding stakeholder engagement with local sustainable development planning processes.

Table 3.1 illustrates the distribution of the respondents by primary stakeholder category. The predominant group comprised local government officials (n=221, 58.9%), encompassing mayors, municipal employees, and administrative staff directly engaged in strategy formulation and implementation. This substantial representation is indicative of two factors; firstly, the survey's distribution through local government networks and secondly, the central role that these actors play in LDS processes. Residents and community members constituted the second-largest category (n=73, 19.5%), providing crucial perspectives from those whom strategies are designed to serve. The NGO/third sector representatives (n=30, 8.0%) provided insights from civil society organisations, frequently acting as intermediaries between the government and communities.

Smaller but analytically valuable groups included village leaders [Pol. *sołtysi*] (n=7, 1.9%), academic researchers (n=4, 1.1%), and council members (n=4, 1.1%). Examining the data further reveals that 5.3% of the respondents self-identified with multiple stakeholder categories. This finding indicates that individuals often occupy overlapping roles in small rural communities. For instance, a resident who also

serves as a village leader or an NGO volunteer can be identified as a stakeholder in multiple categories.

Table 3.1. The distribution of the respondents by stakeholder category

The stakeholder category	Frequency	Percentage
Local government officials	221	58.9%
Residents/community members	73	19.5%
NGOs / Third Sector	30	8.0%
Village leaders	7	1.9%
Academia/researchers	4	1.1%
Council members	4	1.1%
Business representatives	4	1.1%
Multiple/hybrid roles	20	5.3%
Other	12	3.2%
Total	375	100.0%

Source: own elaboration.

An analysis of the survey responses revealed that 191 respondents (50.9%) indicated no direct participation in strategy formulation, while 103 (27.5%) served as representatives of local authorities, 22 (5.9%) as project managers, and 15 (4.0%) as consultants or experts. This distribution is advantageous from the methodological perspective, as it facilitates a comparison between individuals who possess insider knowledge of strategy development processes and those who primarily experience strategies as residents or external observers (Wendt, 2020).

The analytical approach. The analytical strategy employed a combination of mixed-methods techniques considered appropriate for exploratory research, intending to examine complex phenomena (Isidiho & Sabran, 2016; Kirby et al., 2024). A quantitative analysis was conducted with a focus on descriptive statistics, comparative analysis across the respondent groups, correlation analysis between dimensions, and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to test for statistically significant differences between stakeholder categories (Nelson et al., 2023). A qualitative analysis of open-ended responses was conducted, with thematic coding employed to identify recurring patterns in success factors, barriers, and recommendations (Potter, 2008).

For the quantitative dimension scores, composite indices were calculated by averaging all indicator ratings within each dimension for each respondent. This resulted in five continuous variables ranging from 1.0 (strongly negative) to 5.0 (strongly positive). The management of missing data is outlined as follows: for specific analyses, deletion across lists was employed, and the resulting sample sizes are reported for each statistical test. The statistical significance of the results was evaluated at the conventional 0.05 level, using the standard error of the mean. Effect sizes were reported where appropriate to complement the testing of the null hypothesis.

3.2. The perceived effectiveness of local sustainable development strategies

Overall effectiveness perceptions

One of the core questions in the survey was: “In your opinion, were the activities related to local sustainable development strategies effective?” This direct assessment provides a baseline understanding of stakeholder confidence in LDS approaches. Figure 3.1 illustrates the distribution of the responses across five categories.

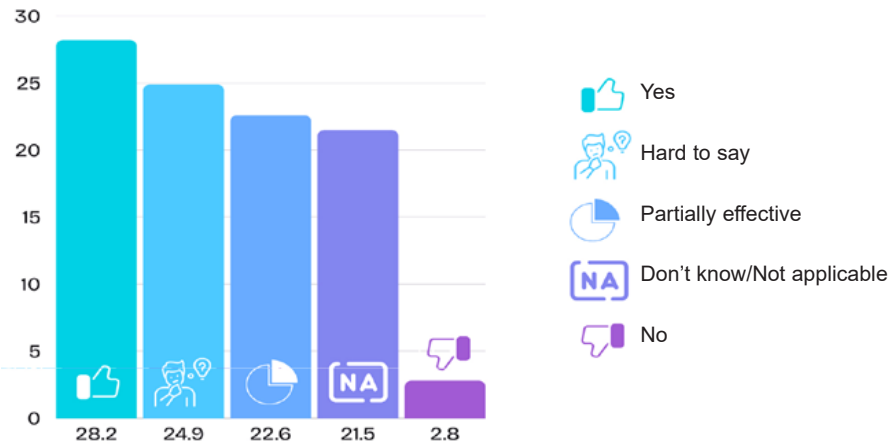


Figure 3.1. The perceived effectiveness of local sustainable development strategies
Source: own elaboration.

Stakeholder Voices: What Makes a Strategy “Effective”?

“The strategies are effective when they are clearly connected to the real needs and interests of the people living here.”
— Respondent 156 (Poland, resident)

“Effective strategies improve access to healthcare, create public spaces where people feel safe, and activate resident participation in decisions that affect their lives.”
— Respondent synthesis (Poland, local authority)

“The biggest challenge is that [some strategies are] abstract with goals that sound good on paper but disconnected from real needs – nothing about education, problems in schools, real support for housing.”
— Respondent (Poland, critical resident voice)

“Strategies succeed when they address what residents actually need – jobs, services, the quality of life – not what distant planners think is important.”
— Representative paraphrase (Belarus)

Effectiveness is not solely defined by formal indicators such as project completion, funding flows, or partnership formation. Instead, residents assess the success of strategies based on the presence of tangible improvements in their daily lives and the extent to which their voices influence decision-making. This distinction is critical to understanding why average effectiveness ratings (3.95/5) indicate only modest progress rather than transformative change.

The study results offer a comprehensive depiction of the perceived effectiveness of the intervention. A mere 28.2% of the respondents (n=100) unequivocally affirmed the efficacy of LDS activities (*Yes*), while 22.6% (n=80) characterised effectiveness as partial (*Partially effective*). Nearly one-quarter of the respondents expressed difficulty in making a definitive judgement (*Hard to say*). Concurrently, 21.5% (n=76) indicated that the question was not relevant to their specific context or that they lacked sufficient information to assess effectiveness (*Don't know/Not applicable*). Conversely, only 2.8% (n=10) of the respondents explicitly stated that the strategies were ineffective (*No*).

These findings necessitate careful interpretation. The comparatively modest percentage of the respondents affirming apparent effectiveness, coupled with high degrees of uncertainty and qualification, implies that LDS outcomes may be ambiguous, context-dependent, or inadequately monitored to facilitate a definitive assessment. Our research demonstrates that strategy evaluation is complex due to multiple factors. Meshack and Awino (2025) note that strategy concepts remain “equivocal” and that scholars struggle to agree on performance measurements. The predominance of partial and uncertain responses likely reflects this complexity, suggesting that organisations need more nuanced, context-sensitive approaches to strategy design and evaluation. The key takeaway is not a failure of strategy, but the need for more sophisticated, adaptive strategic assessment methods.

Variation in effectiveness perception by stakeholder group

A more detailed analysis of the effectiveness perceptions reveals informative patterns when the data is disaggregated by respondent category (Table 3.2). Representatives of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) demonstrated the most positive outlook, with 65.6% reporting that their strategies were effective and only 6.2% indicating uncertainty. This optimistically valiant perspective may reflect numerous factors: NGOs frequently serve as implementing partners for LDS projects, thereby potentially engendering both investment in demonstrating success and proximity to tangible project outcomes. The evidence suggests that this perspective is well-founded. Svarstad and Benjaminsen (2017) directly demonstrate how NGOs construct success narratives that often lack substantive evidence, driven by organisational interests in marketing positive outcomes. Banks and Hulme (2012) further support this, highlighting that NGOs frequently depoliticise complex issues by treating them as technical problems with straightforward solutions, Gibson and Wisner (2019) add nuance, noting that NGOs face significant constraints from

institutional funding and accountability pressures, which can limit their ability to achieve a transformative change. Collectively, these studies indicate that while NGOs are committed to project implementation, they adopt a pragmatic stance regarding the scale of potential improvements, crafting narratives that strike a balance between optimism and realistic expectations.

Table 3.2. Perceived effectiveness by stakeholder category

The stakeholder category	Effective (%)	Partially effective (%)	Hard to say (%)	Don't know/NA (%)	Not effective (%)
Local government	26.8	23.7	22.3	25.0	2.2
Residents/community	20.5	21.7	34.9	18.1	4.8
NGOs/third sector	65.6	21.9	6.2	6.2	0.0
Village leaders	33.3	16.7	16.7	33.3	0.0
Academia	0.0	20.0	40.0	20.0	20.0

Source: own elaboration.

Local government officials demonstrated more tempered assessments, with 26.8% reporting effectiveness and notably high proportions selecting Hard to say (22.3%) or Don't know (25.0%) responses. This pattern suggests either an honest acknowledgement of implementation challenges, limited capacity for systemic monitoring, or a reluctance to claim success for strategies that have not yet produced visible results. The approximately equal distribution of responses across response categories among local officials indicates heterogeneity in experiences across municipalities.

The evidence substantiates this claim through multiple dimensions. Agasisti and colleagues (2020) identified three distinct implementation patterns among municipalities, demonstrating that local governments approach performance measurement systems with markedly different strategies. Sandoval-Almazán and colleagues (2021) further confirm this variation, noting “varying levels of knowledge” and policy implementation challenges across municipalities. The approximately equal distribution of responses among local officials suggests that the implementation process is not uniform but rather complex, characterised by a multitude of challenges. Nkosi (2015) reinforced this by highlighting factors such as resource limitations and resistance to change as key implementation obstacles. This pattern indicates an objective acknowledgement of the multifaceted and context-dependent nature of municipal strategy implementation.

Residents and community members showed the highest levels of uncertainty, with 34.9% selecting Hard to say and only 20.5% affirming effectiveness. This result is particularly significant given the study's focus on resident-centred evaluation. The findings indicate that many community members lack adequate information or observable evidence to assess whether strategies are effective (Farrell et al.,

2025). This information gap is attributed to several factors, including insufficient communication about strategies, goals, and progress, limited resident participation in implementation, as well as delays between strategy adoption and measurable community-level outcomes (Moreira et al., 2022).

The small academic subgroup ($n=5$) reported predominantly unfavourable perceptions, with 20% indicating that strategies were ineffective and 40% indicating doubt. While the sample size is insufficient for definitive conclusions, the observed pattern suggests that researchers applying rigorous evaluative standards tend to be more critical in assessing LDS outcomes than practitioners in implementation settings.

3.3. Quantitative assessment across sustainability dimensions

Overall dimension performance

The survey's analytical contribution focuses on a systemic assessment of five sustainability dimensions, utilising multiple indicators rated on 5-point Likert scales. Table 3.3 provides comprehensive descriptive statistics for each dimension, highlighting both central tendencies and variability in stakeholder perceptions.

Table 3.3. Descriptive statistics for sustainability dimensions

The dimension	Mean	Std Dev	Median	Min	Max	N
Social	3.970	0.716	4.042	1.0	5.0	342
Economic	3.854	0.821	4.000	1.0	5.0	331
Environmental	3.891	0.852	4.000	1.0	5.0	329
Institutional	3.904	0.830	4.000	1.0	5.0	331
Spatial	4.103	0.827	4.200	1.0	5.0	333

Source: own elaboration.

Figure 3.2 presents box plots that visually depict these distributions and provide further insights into quartile ranges and the presence of outliers.

Mean ratings across all five dimensions were moderately positive, ranging from 3.85 to 4.10 on the 5-point scale. This narrow range suggests that stakeholders perceive LDS performance as consistent across various sustainability aspects rather than excelling in some areas while underperforming in others. Median scores (4.0–4.2) indicate that most respondents rate each dimension slightly above the midpoint of the scale, reflecting cautiously optimistic assessments.

The spatial dimension received the highest mean score ($M = 4.103$, $SD = 0.827$), indicating that stakeholders were most satisfied with infrastructure quality, service accessibility, and the clarity of spatial planning. This strong performance suggests that the tangible, observable nature of spatial investments – such as roads, public

spaces, and utilities – enables easier recognition and appreciation by community members than more abstract institutional processes or complex socioeconomic dynamics.

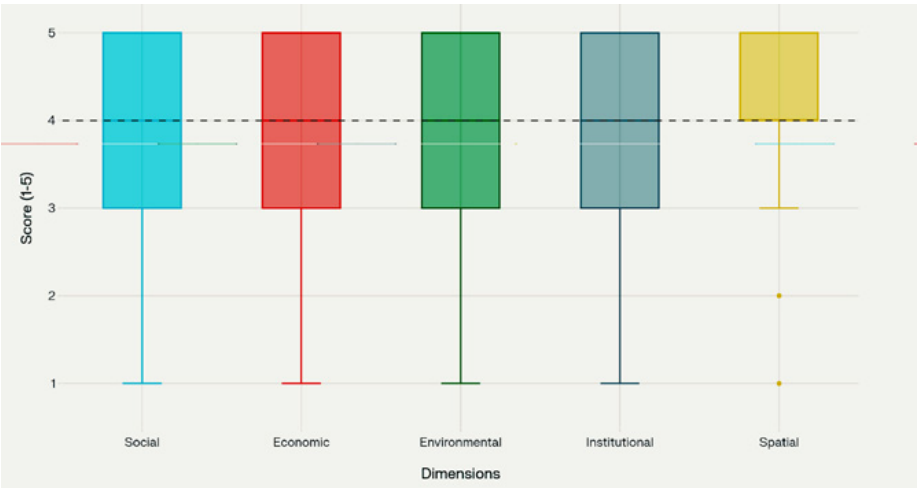


Figure 3.2. The distribution of sustainability scores

Source: own elaboration.

The social dimension was the second highest-rated ($M = 3.970$, $SD = 0.716$) and showed the lowest standard deviation, indicating greater consensus among the respondents. Indicators in this dimension addressed the quality of life, community engagement, social inclusion, and cultural heritage, which the respondents across stakeholder categories could evaluate based on lived experience.

Community Priorities: Social and Spatial Dimensions in Practice

“Improvements in access to healthcare, creation of safe public spaces, and community activities that bring people together – these are what we notice.”
— Respondent synthesis (Poland, residents)

“Infrastructure matters because it is visible and directly affects daily life: roads you can drive safely, places where people gather, accessible services.”
— Respondent paraphrase (both countries)

“Environmental quality and natural resource protection are important because they affect what we pass on to our children and what we eat and where we walk.”
— Representative resident voice (Poland)

“Social cohesion – that people trust each other and work together – comes first. Without that trust, no strategy works.”
— Respondent synthesis (both countries)

These findings clarify why the spatial dimension and the social dimension receive consistently high ratings across all stakeholder groups (4.13 and 3.98, respectively). These dimensions represent tangible, visible, and universally valued improvements that residents directly experience. In contrast, the economic dimension and the institutional dimension are perceived as more abstract and contested.

The combination of a relatively high rating and low variability suggests the broad recognition that LDS efforts have maintained or modestly improved social conditions, even though transformative progress has not been achieved.

The institutional dimension ($M = 3.904$, $SD = 0.830$) and the environmental dimension ($M = 3.891$, $SD = 0.852$) received nearly identical ratings, both just below the 4.0 threshold. These moderate scores, combined with higher standard deviations, indicate greater heterogeneity in stakeholder experiences or perceptions.

An analysis of institutional aspects – including governance, transparency, participatory mechanisms, and multilevel coordination – reveals that variability reflects genuine differences in local governance quality across municipalities. Environmental ratings similarly vary depending on the baseline conditions of the communities, which range from pristine environments to degraded landscapes, and on whether the respondents prioritise conservation or development.

The economic dimension received the lowest mean rating ($M = 3.854$, $SD = 0.821$), although it remained above the midpoint of the scale. This result aligns with broader challenges faced by rural economies in Central and Eastern Europe, such as limited diversification, youth out-migration, and difficulties in competing with urban centres for investment and labour. The relatively lower rating indicates that stakeholders recognise that LDS efforts have not fully addressed economic vulnerabilities, even as improvements have occurred in social, environmental, and infrastructural domains.

Interdimensional correlations

An integrated sustainability approach raises a specific question: does progress in one area tend to accompany progress in others, or are trade-offs required for gains in one area to be made at the expense of another? Figure 3.3 presents the correlation matrix for the five dimensions.

The analysis reveals consistently strong positive interrelations among all pairs of dimensions, with correlation coefficients ranging from $r = 0.723$ to $r = 0.797$. Each correlation surpasses the conventional threshold for strong associations ($r > 0.70$) and is statistically significant at $p < 0.001$. These findings support the integrated character of sustainable development in practice, as communities and municipalities excelling in one dimension typically demonstrate strong performance in others. Conversely, those facing challenges in one area often encounter difficulties across other dimensions (Harbiantkova & Gertsberg, 2022).

The strongest correlations are observed between the institutional dimension and the environmental dimension ($r = 0.797$) as well as between the economic

dimension and the social dimension ($r = 0.782$). The association between institutional and environmental factors suggests that efficient administration – including clear decision-making processes, robust participation mechanisms, and coordinated planning – promotes effective environmental management. This pattern aligns with environmental governance literature, which emphasises that environmental outcomes are primarily determined by institutional capacity, stakeholder engagement, and rule enforcement (Sánchez-Sellero et al., 2021).

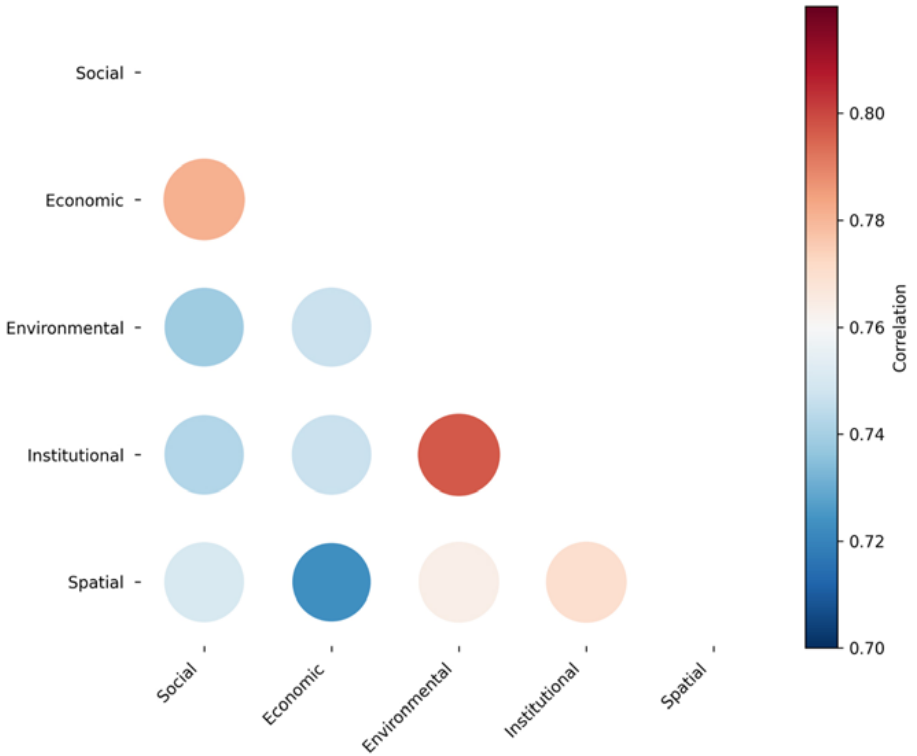


Figure 3.3. The correlation matrix for the five dimensions of sustainability
Source: own elaboration.

The correlation between the economic dimension and social dimension indicates a close linkage between economic opportunities and social well-being in rural contexts. Empirical evidence demonstrates that communities with diversified local economies, entrepreneurial support structures, and investment in productive activities achieve higher scores on social indicators such as the quality of life, community engagement, and social inclusion. This interdependence highlights the limitations of both social development strategies that are disconnected from economic foundations as well as economic growth strategies that overlook social equity and cohesion (Berkes & Ross, 2013).

The correlation between the economic dimension and the spatial dimension ($r = 0.723$) is somewhat weaker but remains substantial. This suggests that infrastructural improvements can occur independently of economic development, especially when supported by external grants or national programmes. Nevertheless, the positive correlation demonstrates mutual reinforcement between spatial investments and economic vitality. High-quality infrastructure attracts investment and stimulates economic activity, while economic resources support the maintenance and enhancement of infrastructure.

These correlation trends have important implications for the design and evaluation of Local Development Strategies (LDS). First, the results confirm the validity of the integrated, multidimensional framework employed in this research, as the dimensions exhibit both conceptual distinctiveness and empirical interdependence. Second, the findings indicate that interventions targeting a single dimension may produce indirect effects on other aspects of sustainability. Third, the evidence suggests that assessment frameworks focusing solely on one or two dimensions risk generating misleading conclusions by neglecting systemic interconnections (Pike et al., 2016).

Comparative analysis by stakeholder category

To determine whether various stakeholder groups perceive LDS performance differently, comparative analyses were conducted across three major respondent categories with adequate sample sizes. These categories included individuals from Local Government ($n = 204$ - 213), Residents/Community ($n = 77$ - 81), and NGOs/third sector ($n = 31$ - 32). Figure 3.4 presents the mean dimension scores for these groups.

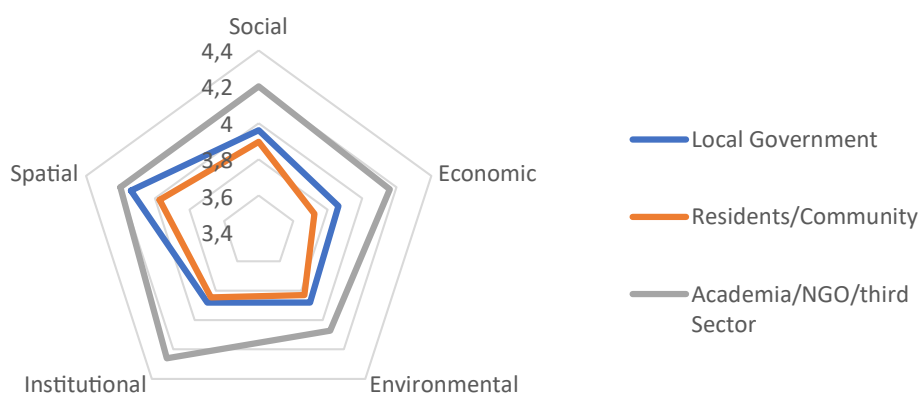


Figure 3.4. Mean dimension scores by major stakeholder categories

Source: own elaboration.

A comprehensive analysis identified three consistent patterns. Representatives of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) / the third sector assigned the highest ratings across all five dimensions. Local government officials provided intermediate assessments, while residents and community members offered the most moderate evaluations. This hierarchy persisted across all dimensions, suggesting systemic differences in stakeholder group experiences or evaluations of LDS outcomes.

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed for each dimension to determine the statistical significance of the observed differences, as shown in Table 3.4.

Table 3.4. The ANOVA results comparing stakeholder categories

The dimension	F-statistic	p-value	Significant (a = 0.05)
Social	2.150	0.118	No
Economic	3.171	0.043	Yes
Environmental	0.877	0.417	No
Institutional	3.318	0.038	Yes
Spatial	1.389	0.251	No

Source: own elaboration.

The ANOVA results indicate statistically significant differences among stakeholder groups for the economic dimension ($F(2,312) = 3.171, p = 0.043$) and the institutional dimension ($F(2,312) = 3.318, p = 0.038$). Conversely, differences in the social, environmental, and spatial dimensions were not statistically significant, although the social dimension approached significance ($p = 0.118$).

For the economic dimension, the significant difference is attributable to NGO representatives providing substantially more positive assessments ($M = 4.159$) than residents ($M = 3.723$). The 0.44-point discrepancy is considerable on a 5-point scale. This finding suggests that NGOs – which frequently engage in economic development initiatives such as entrepreneurship support, skills training, and micro-enterprise development – are more likely to encounter success stories and direct beneficiaries than typical residents.

By contrast, residents frequently experience persistent economic challenges, such as limited employment opportunities, stagnant wages, and youth emigration. The success of individual projects does not necessarily mitigate these broader issues, which can contribute to more pessimistic overall assessments (Reed et al., 2006).

A comparable pattern is observed for the institutional dimension, with NGOs rating institutional aspects significantly higher ($M = 4.260$) than residents ($M = 3.846$) or local government officials ($M = 3.881$). This finding prompts theoretical considerations. One explanation is that NGOs, as organisational actors who regularly interact with institutional frameworks, are more attuned to governance improvements that residents can overlook or officials may regard as routine. Furthermore, NGOs can benefit most directly from enhanced transparency,

participatory mechanisms, and multi-level coordination, as these factors facilitate advocacy and project implementation. In contrast, residents with limited engagement in formal institutions may not perceive incremental governance improvements as meaningful changes in their daily lives (Charbit, 2011).

The evidence suggests that the social, environmental, and spatial aspects of sustainable development are experienced in a more uniform way across stakeholder groups. Infrastructure improvements consistently produce positive outcomes for all members of society, as demonstrated by the expansion of transportation networks and services. Strengthening community cohesion fosters inclusive participation, and improvements in environmental quality benefit all stakeholders. Consequently, these dimensions are less sensitive to the position effects that influence the perceptions of economic and institutional factors (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2010).

3.4. Key success factors – examining stakeholder perceptions

The quantitative rankings of success criteria

The survey inquired about the factors considered as the most important for the success of local sustainable development strategies, offering a pre-defined list of options for selection, with multiple options permitted. This approach thus enabled the quantitative ranking of factors by frequency of endorsement. Figure 3.5 presents the distribution of responses (n=349 valid responses to this question).

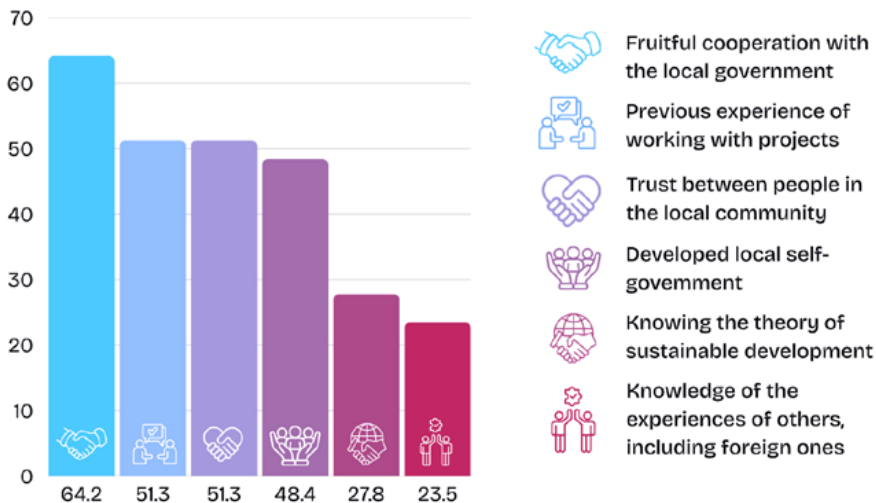


Figure 3.5. The distribution of responses about the factors considered most important for the success of local sustainable development strategies

Source: own elaboration.

The reflections of the survey's participants support the quantitative finding that **community trust** and **cooperation with authorities** are the two most significant success factors. These factors represent concrete social conditions, grounded in repeated positive experiences, transparent communication, and consistent follow-through (see Text Box).

The Foundation of Success: Trust and Cooperation Explained

"Fruitful cooperation with local authorities – when the municipality works with residents and organisations rather than at them – makes the biggest difference."

— Respondent synthesis (Poland, multiple stakeholders)

"Trust between people in the local community means believing that when you contribute your time and ideas, they will be respected and will matter to the final decisions."

— Respondent paraphrase (Poland, resident)

"Without mutual trust and the experience of working together successfully on previous projects, residents are hesitant to engage in new initiatives."

— Respondent observation (both countries)

"Experience in cooperation – the accumulated knowledge of how to work together effectively – comes from learning by doing, not from training manuals."

— Respondent reflection (Poland, local authority/academic)

The most frequently endorsed success factor, identified by nearly two-thirds of the respondents (64.2%, n=224), was "fruitful cooperation with local authorities." This consensus underscores the critical role of effective relationships between strategy designers, implementers, and local government officials. In rural areas, where municipalities manage most public resources, coordinate land use, and act as primary intermediaries with higher levels of government, engagement with local authorities is essential for translating strategic visions into tangible outcomes (Forrest & Wiek, 2015).

The second and third most frequently cited factors – namely "experience in project cooperation" (51.3%, n=179) and trust between people in the local community" (51.3%, n=179) – received identical endorsement rates. The emphasis on experiential knowledge suggests that effective LDS implementation requires communities and organisations to develop capabilities through learning-by-doing. This finding affirms the value of leveraging the existing cooperation networks and prior successful projects rather than introducing complex strategies in environments without established collaborative infrastructure (Putnam et al., 1994).

The prominent role of community trust is consistent with social capital literature, which demonstrates that interpersonal trust facilitates collective action, reduces transaction costs, and enables communities to mobilise resources for shared objectives. Within the LDS framework, trust operates through several channels: residents are expected to trust leaders and officials to act in the community's interest; organisational partners are expected to trust one another to fulfil commitments; and participants must trust that their contributions will not be exploited. Without

such trust, participation declines and strategic initiatives struggle to gain momentum (Meschede & Mainka, 2020).

The fourth most frequently cited success factor, endorsed by nearly half of the respondents, was developed local self-government (48.4%, n=169). This result highlights the importance of capable, legitimate, and well-resourced local government institutions. In Central and Eastern Europe, decades of centralisation under communist regimes resulted in weak local governance, and subsequent decentralisation reforms have progressed unevenly. The emphasis on developed self-government indicates that LDS effectiveness depends on the maturity of local democratic institutions and administrative capacity (Sharifi, 2016).

Knowledge of sustainable development theory (27.8%, n=97) and knowledge of others' experiences, including international (23.5%, n=82) were endorsed by substantially fewer respondents.

These findings do not suggest that theoretical knowledge and learning from other contexts is unimportant. Instead, stakeholders appear to prioritise practical relational factors – such as cooperation, trust, and experience – over abstract knowledge. This pattern can reflect practitioners' focus on implementation challenges rather than conceptual frameworks, or it can indicate that theoretical knowledge is most valuable when it supports practical cooperation rather than serving as an independent factor (Sivagrakau, 2008).

Qualitative findings from open-ended responses

Open-ended questions elicited descriptions of successful strategies and the underlying reasons for their effectiveness. A thematic analysis of these responses (n=201) offers deeper insight into stakeholder priorities and concerns.

A dominant theme identified in the study is the emphasis on **community engagement and participation**, which emerged as both a critical success factor and an area requiring further development. Representative responses reinforce the central hypothesis that community engagement is essential for the effectiveness of Local Development Strategies (LDS). The respondents further distinguished between tokenistic and authentic participation, with several of them explicitly critiquing consultations perceived as formalities rather than substantive dialogue (Hofer et al., 2024):

- “The most important thing is that people are heard” [Respondent 156];
- “Community activity and their engagement” [Respondent 089];
- “Greater involvement of residents, entrepreneurs, and local authorities in strategy creation” [Respondent 234];
- “I believe that the greatest improvement to future strategies would be making resident participation mandatory and genuine at the strategy creation stage” [Respondent 287].

Another important theme was the need for **simplification and accessibility**. The respondents wanted less bureaucratic complexity, faster funding processes, and

clearer strategies that ordinary citizens can understand. These concerns highlight practical implementation challenges in systems characterised by multiple administrative layers, complex funding mechanisms, and demanding reporting requirements, which can overwhelm small rural municipalities and local organisations (Keahey, 2021; Szetey et al., 2021):

- “simplification and greater differentiation of approaches to projects – modularity and flexibility in implementation” [Respondent 301];
- “Simplification, decreased bureaucracy, making it easier to convey knowledge, reaching people in their homes” [Respondent 178];
- “The duration of application processing, their complication, removing agency from Local Action Groups in managing applications” [Respondent 142].

A third theme emphasises the importance of **education** and **awareness-raising**, as the respondents noted that both residents and officials frequently lack the understanding of sustainable development principles. These statements indicate that effective LDS implementation depends not only on technical capacity but also on shared conceptual frameworks and value commitments. Such alignment among diverse stakeholders is necessary to achieve sustainability goals (Sivagrakau, 2018):

- “Education about sustainable development is the change that would most improve future strategies” [Respondent 267];
- “Raising community awareness about possibilities arising from action planning and implementing strategic thinking at the level accessible to city/municipality residents” [Respondent 219];
- “Convincing and raising society’s awareness about local sustainable development strategies” [Respondent 087].

A fourth theme addresses **monitoring and evaluation**, with experienced respondents calling for improved systems to track progress and facilitate organisational learning. These observations align with the existing theory which emphasises that monitoring and evaluation systems support both accountability and organisational learning. Such systems enable the adaptation of strategies in response to changing conditions and new evidence (Harbiankova & Shcherbina, 2021; Janzen et al., 2023):

- “Regular, honest results analysis = good monitoring, creating procedures that encourage organisations and entities to update documents, plans, and lower-level strategies” [Respondent 198];
- “The lack of systems that would allow the ongoing measurement of action effects and strategy adjustment; difficulties in formulating adequate conclusions; problems with accessing data” [Respondent 321].

Finally, several respondents identified **financial constraints** as a persistent challenge. These concerns underscore the tension between ambitious strategic objectives and limited implementation resources, particularly in rural municipalities with constrained financial bases and reliance on external funding sources (H. Li et al., 2022; Meirinawati et al., 2018):

- “Limited financial resources and personnel” [Respondent 301];
- “Greater amounts of funding and acceleration of processes related to co-financing and investment settlement” [Respondent 189];
- “Certainty regarding the possibilities of financing assumptions adopted in the strategy” [Respondent 245].

3.5. The synthesis of key insights and its quantitative analysis

The synthesis of key findings

This empirical investigation of 375 stakeholder responses produced several significant findings relevant to both the theory and practice of rural sustainable development. The moderate mean effectiveness ratings (3.85–4.10 on a 5-point scale) across all five dimensions suggest that LDS approaches have achieved partial success but have not resulted in a transformative change. Stakeholders perceive these strategies as modestly beneficial rather than fundamentally altering rural development trajectories. This measured evaluation highlights the need to acknowledge progress while also recognising substantial opportunities for improvement.

The strong positive correlations between dimensions ($r = 0.72\text{--}0.80$) provide empirical support for integrated sustainability frameworks. Progress observed in this study appears mutually reinforcing across societal, economic, environmental, institutional, and spatial domains, thereby validating the theoretical premise that these dimensions should not be addressed in isolation. This interdependence suggests that interventions must be designed with careful attention to cross-dimensional synergies and potential trade-offs (Nasser Salifu, 2025).

Systemic differences between stakeholder categories – particularly the more positive assessments by NGO representatives compared to residents – indicate that LDS evaluation should incorporate multiple perspectives instead of relying on single-actor assessments. The finding that residents – who are the intended beneficiaries of development strategies – provide the most cautious evaluations warrants particular attention. The success of LDS – as measured by project completion, funding flows, and partnership formation – may not necessarily translate into improved quality of life for community members, at least not as commonly perceived (Snell et al., 2022; Viccaro et al., 2021). This observation applies to both technical implementers and civil society organisations.

The significance attributed to relational factors – such as cooperation with authorities, community trust, and collaborative experience, in the conditions identified by stakeholders as conducive to success – underscores that sustainable development is fundamentally a social and political process rather than solely a technical undertaking. While knowledge, resources, and planning are important, the quality of relationships and institutional contexts appears decisive for translating intentions into outcomes. This finding aligns with contemporary theoretical frameworks that

emphasise governance quality and social capital as the critical determinants of developmental outcomes (Bianchi & Richiedei, 2023).

The analysis identified five qualitative themes – community engagement, simplification, education, monitoring, and financing – that collectively indicate specific areas where LDS practice could be strengthened. The stakeholder recommendations presented here provide an evidence-based agenda for improving strategy design and implementation processes.

Most of the survey respondents were representatives of local authorities and management personnel. Local government officials comprised 62.1% (233 respondents), followed by individuals with multiple roles at 20.5% (77 respondents), and NGOs/third sector representatives at 11.5% (43 respondents). The data was consolidated into eight major categories (Figure 3.6). The high response rate suggests the importance of the issue under scrutiny, specifically the assessment of sustainable development strategy effectiveness. Evidence indicates that localities have adopted divergent attitudes towards strategy formulation, and there is a recognition of the replication of strategies, sometimes without modification to regional nomenclature. The survey reveals a new dominant trend, namely a fundamental interest in the effectiveness of these strategies.

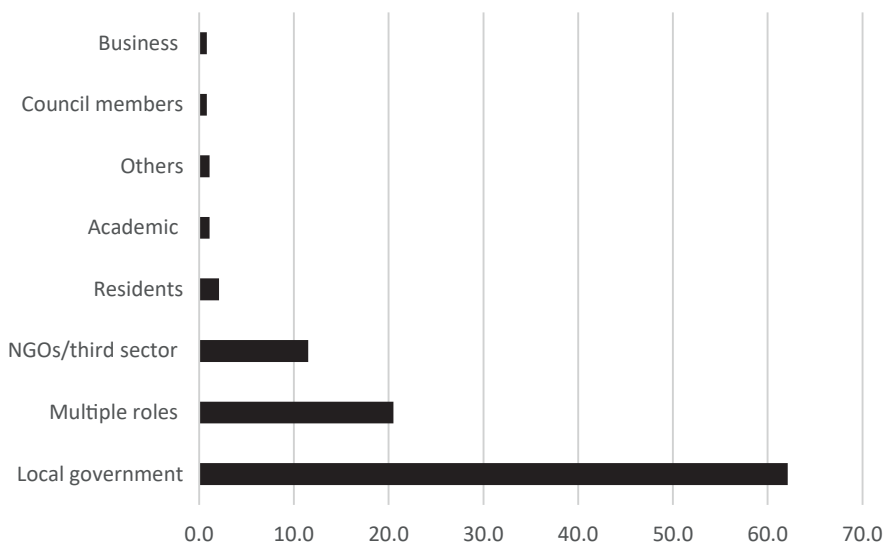


Figure 3.6. The distribution of survey respondents by stakeholder category, % (n=375)
Source: own elaboration.

Figure 3.7 demonstrates that at least one-third of the strategies are designed for periods exceeding five years. Most strategies are long-term, with 33.3% extending beyond five years, 28.0% covering three to five years, and 19.2% limited to three years or less. These findings indicate a clear preference for development methodologies characterised by continuity and sustained implementation. This trend is

particularly noteworthy, as a significant proportion of participants initially supported short-term initiatives during the early stages of strategy formulation.

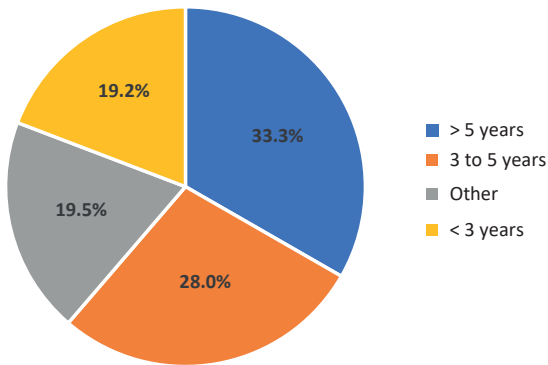


Figure 3.7. The distribution of strategies by the duration of the implementation period (n=375)

Source: own elaboration.

The geographical distribution of the study participants is predominantly rural, as illustrated in Figure 3.8. Most strategies (51.2%) are implemented at the local-village level, with 13.6% at the regional level and 12.8% at the local-city level. This concentration at the village level reflects the structure of the EU LEADER programme and indicates that assessment frameworks should be tailored to micro-local contexts rather than assuming uniform effectiveness across different administrative scales.

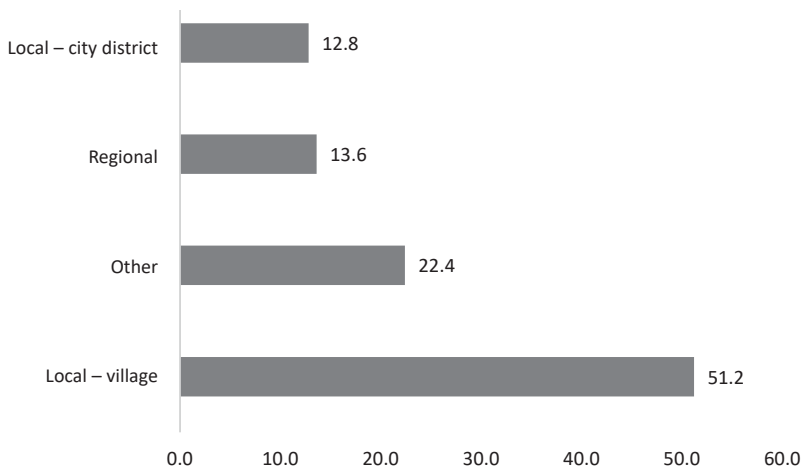


Figure 3.8. The distribution of local sustainable development strategies by implementation scale

Source: own elaboration.

A thorough analysis of the sectors targeted by local strategies indicates civic infrastructure as the leading priority, accounting for 64.3% of the total, followed by entrepreneurship at 23.0% and agriculture at 22.0% (Figure 3.9). The data has been consolidated into the top ten sectors, in addition to the Other category, in accordance with the specified request. As further in-depth detailed research will show, the choice of infrastructure as the main sector (and, in fact, the priority) of local sustainable development strategies is not such a clear-cut point, and this is largely since the absolute majority of the respondents represent local administrations. *Does it make sense to continue this trend? Does the local population support such a development? Can infrastructure have a positive impact on local development if we do not pay sufficient attention to other areas of activity?* We hope that the following analysis will help answer these questions.

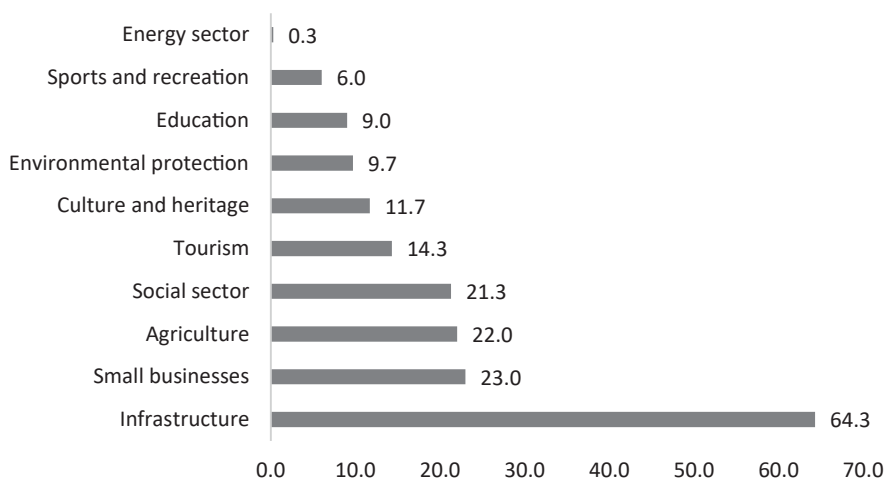


Figure 3.9. The main sectors addressed in local sustainable development strategies (percentages may exceed 100% as multiple selections of sectors were allowed)

Source: own elaboration.

The survey identified divergent perceptions regarding the effectiveness of local strategies among different stakeholder groups. While local residents generally reported high satisfaction with the effectiveness of these strategies, they assigned significantly lower ratings to specific indicators when compared to local administrations, experts, and NGOs, as illustrated in Figure 3.10. In contrast, the latter group is characterised by a preponderance of positive appraisals, indicative of an optimistic outlook. Indeed, the most optimistic respondents were NGOs/third sector representatives, with 57.9% reporting Yes to the question of the effectiveness of local sustainable development strategies. Conversely, the respondents with multiple roles demonstrated the greatest uncertainty, with 37.3% reporting Hard to say. Local government officials demonstrated a balanced perspective, with 26.8%

expressing a positive stance, 22.3% exhibiting ambivalence, and 23.7% exhibiting a partial stance.

Furthermore, data analysis revealed that representatives at the voivodeship level most frequently identified the development of infrastructure (55 mentions) and entrepreneurship (32 mentions) as primary outcomes of the strategies (Figure 3.11). This trend highlights the necessity for additional research to elucidate the factors contributing to these perceptions.

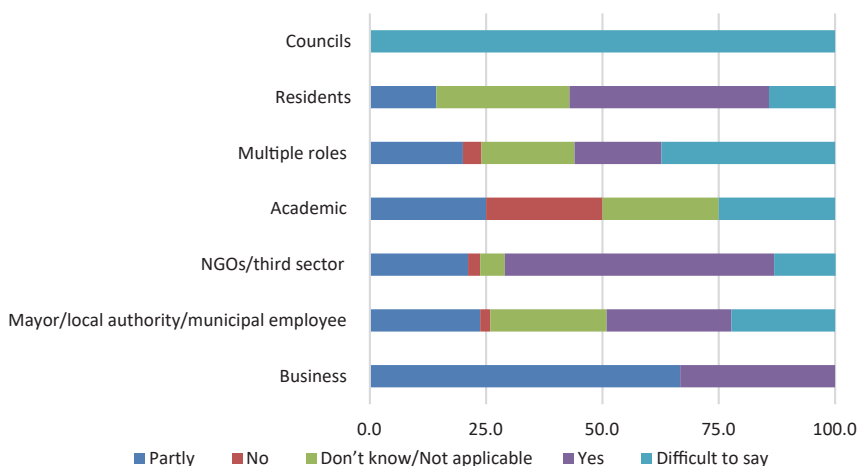


Figure 3.10. The distribution of effectiveness perceptions across different stakeholder categories (percentages within each group)

Source: own elaboration.

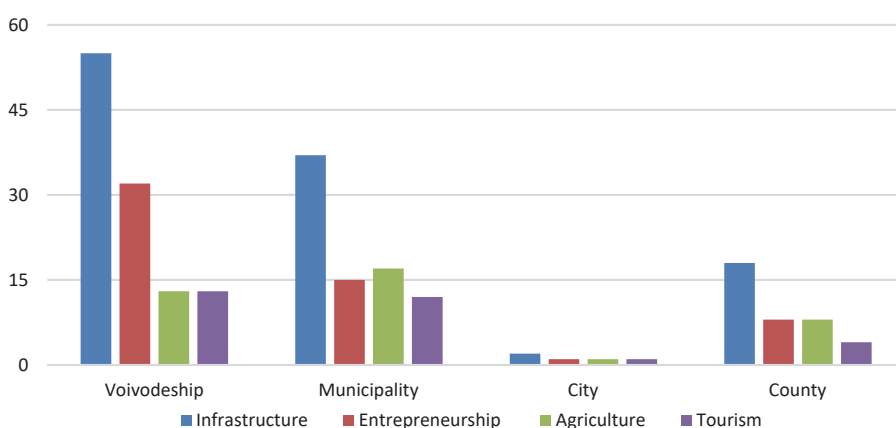


Figure 3.11. The distribution of the main development sectors across various implementation scales

Source: own elaboration.

The quantitative ratings analysis of key findings

The respondents rated overall effectiveness at 3.95 out of 5, indicating a moderately positive assessment, as shown in Figure 3.12. A 0.34-point difference exists between the most optimistic and the most cautious groups. These results demonstrate that stakeholders perceive effectiveness differently, suggesting the absence of a universal consensus on development success (Reidsma et al., 2020). Furthermore, there is considerable variation among stakeholder groups. Academics and non-governmental organisations assigned the highest ratings, whereas residents provided the lowest scores (Figure 3.13). This disparity indicates that stakeholders hold differing perceptions regarding the successful aspects of the initiative. Residents – who are most directly involved in daily implementation – exhibit the greatest scepticism. Regarding performance by dimension, advanced dimensions received higher prioritisation, in contrast to traditional approaches where these components are often not apparent (Figure 3.14).

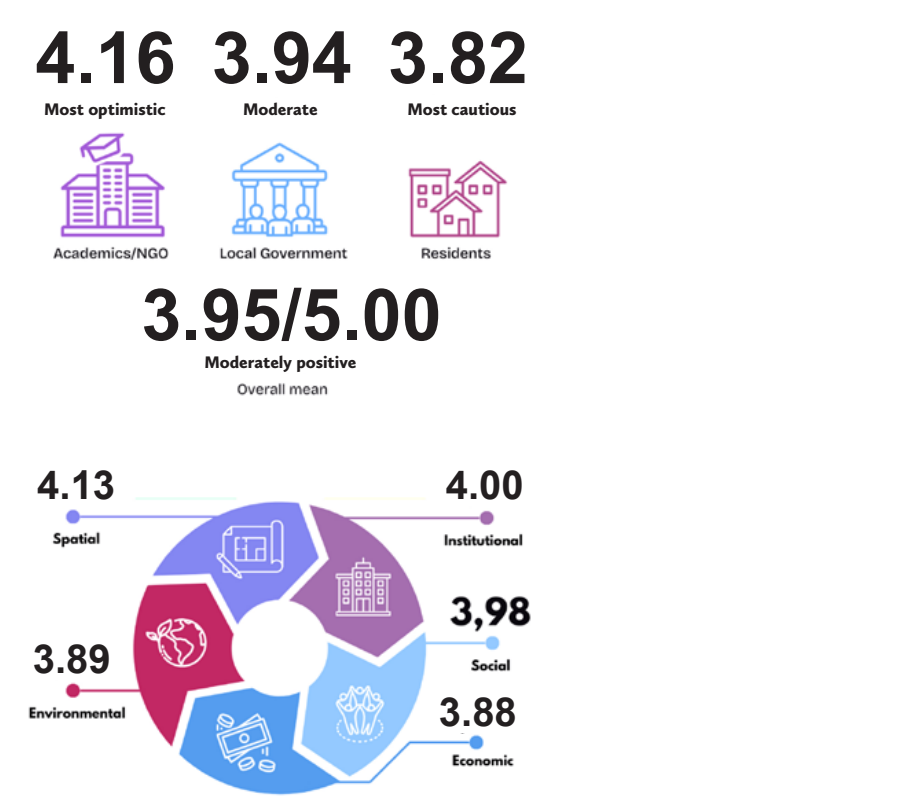


Figure 3.12. Overall findings

Source: own elaboration.

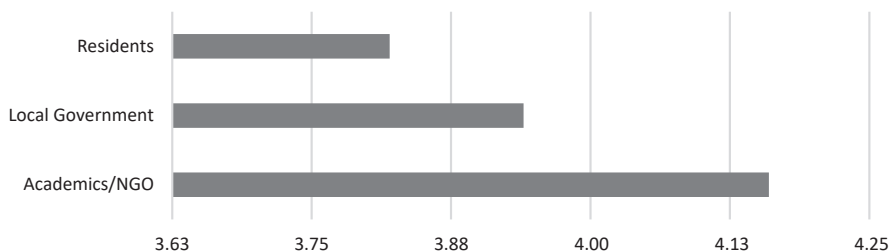


Figure 3.13. Effectiveness ratings by stakeholders

Source: own elaboration.

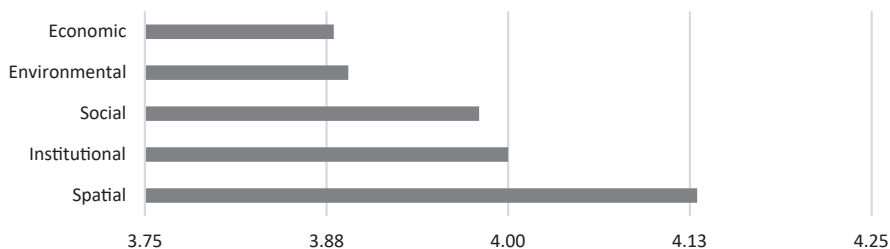


Figure 3.14. Where do strategies perform best/worst? – performance by dimension

Source: own elaboration.

Table 3.5. Dimension-specific insights

Dimension	Highest rated	Lowest rated	Most variable	Most consistent	Pattern
THE SOCIAL DIMENSION (4 indicators, avg: 3.98)	Access to Public Services (4.30)	Community Engagement (3.58)	Community Engagement (range: 0.72)	Stakeholder perception gap	Academics/ NGO consistently rate 0.3–0.5 points higher than Residents
THE ECONOMIC DIMENSION (5 indicators, avg: 3.88)	Economic Activity Intensity (3.95)	Green Economy (3.61)	Green Economy (range: 0.65)	Economic Activity Intensity	Largest dimension gaps, especially on Green Economy (0.65 difference)
THE ENVIRONMENTAL DIMENSION (5 indicators, avg: 3.89)	Highest rated: Natural Resource Management (3.92)	Environmental Priorities (3.74)	Environmental Priorities	Most consistent across groups (SD = 0.146)	Least disagreement between stakeholders

Table 3.5. *continued*

Dimension	Highest rated	Lowest rated	Most variable	Most consistent	Pattern
THE INSTITUTIONAL DIMENSION (4 indicators, avg: 4.00)	Meeting Participation (4.05)	Participation Awareness (3.49)	Participation Awareness (range: 0.56)	Meeting Participation	Academics/ NGO are significantly more positive than Residents
THE SPATIAL DIMENSION (4 indicators, avg: 4.13)	Infrastructure Quality (4.30)	Plan Accessibility (3.96)	Infrastructure Quality (range: 0.80)	Most consistent: All groups rate similarly (moderate agreement)	HIGHEST OVERALL RATINGS across all dimensions: Tangible, visible improvements recognised by all

Source: own elaboration.

The evidence presented in Table 3.5 indicates that overall assessments of local sustainable development are moderately positive. The highest ratings are observed in the spatial dimension and the institutional dimension, reflecting satisfaction with infrastructure and participation in meetings. In contrast, the social dimension and the economic dimension receive lower ratings, primarily due to weaker scores and greater variability in community engagement and green economy. This pattern indicates that participation in green transition initiatives is uneven and that confidence in these initiatives remains limited. The environmental dimension demonstrates the biggest consistency across stakeholder groups, suggesting shared perceptions regarding natural resources management and environmental priorities. Academics and NGOs consistently rate conditions more positively than residents do, particularly in the social dimension and the institutional dimension. This discrepancy in perception may compromise the validity and ownership of development strategies. The widespread recognition of spatial enhancements could serve as a pragmatic entry point for increasing resident participation in governance and environmental issues.

4. Different views on the effectiveness of local strategies, success factors, and territorial focus

4.1. Noticeable discrepancies in the assessments of strategy elements across different groups of respondents

Quantitative ratings analysis

The allocation of significance by the respondents revealed a surprising discrepancy in the relative importance attributed to different components of the strategy. The spatial and institutional elements received a notably higher ranking compared to the social, economic, and environmental aspects (Figure 4.1). This is arguably attributable at least in part to a relative absence of prior opportunity for such an evaluation.

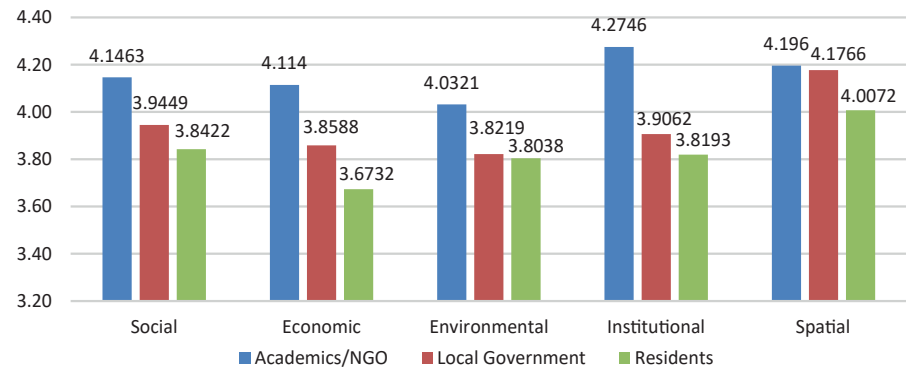


Figure 4.1. A comparison of mean dimension scores across five sustainability domains for three stakeholder categories

Source: own elaboration.

Figure 4.2 clearly illustrates the variation in the assessments of the importance of the five selected dimensions of the strategy (and, indeed, their priorities) by the three aggregated groups of respondents. The most restrained (despite being positive) assessments are those from local residents, the most average come from local administrations, and the highest (as previously mentioned – optimistic) are from experts and NGOs. A multitude of explanations exist for this phenomenon, with

the utilisation of diverse methodologies and assessment scales being a contributing aspect, among others.

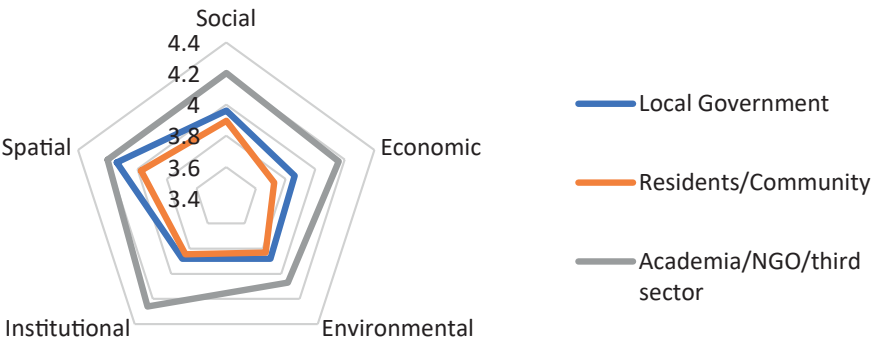


Figure 4.2. A radar chart comparing three stakeholder groups across five sustainability dimensions

Source: own elaboration.

Figure 4.3. shows a detailed comparison of rankings provided by the respondents.

Top stakeholders’ disagreements within eight sustainability indicators show the greatest variation in ratings between stakeholder groups. Figure 4.3 demonstrates a clear differentiation in the strength of the relationships between sustainability dimensions and success factors. The highest intensities (values above 0.60) are concentrated in the social dimension and the institutional dimension, particularly in relation to trust, cooperation with local authorities, and stakeholder engagement. These values indicate strong and consistent associations, confirming that relational and governance-related factors are perceived as the primary drivers of strategy effectiveness.

Moderate relationships (0.40–0.59) dominate in the economic dimension, suggesting that economic outcomes are linked to success factors but play a secondary role compared to social and institutional mechanisms. This pattern supports earlier findings that economic performance alone does not determine the perceived effectiveness at the local level.

In contrast, the environmental dimension and the spatial dimension display mostly weak to moderate associations (below 0.40), with stronger links limited to factors related to administrative capacity and long-term planning. This indicates that these dimensions are viewed as more dependent on institutional coordination than on direct community involvement.

Overall, the heat-map demonstrates that strategy effectiveness is structured around a relational core, where the social dimension and the institutional dimension act as integrative elements, while the economic, environmental, and spatial dimensions play a more supportive and conditional role.

Community engagement	4.41	3.94	3.70
Income inequality	3.66	3.59	3.69
Demographics & migration	4.02	3.96	3.75
Access to services	4.49	4.29	4.23
Economic activity	4.05	4.00	3.74
Market opportunities	4.03	3.81	3.68
Investment scale	4.15	4.04	3.80
Green economy	4.05	3.58	3.40
Business climate	4.30	3.87	3.75
Natural resources	3.90	3.93	3.89
Environmental actions	4.10	3.83	3.86
Environmental priorities	3.95	3.73	3.65
Biodiversity	4.18	3.80	3.82
Transparency	4.30	3.97	3.90
Participation awareness	4.41	3.96	3.85
Meeting participation	4.56	4.01	3.88
Minority interests	3.93	3.62	3.70
Strategy alignment	4.17	3.97	3.77
Infrastructure quality	4.27	4.36	4.12
Public transport	4.24	4.34	4.07
Spatial plans	4.15	4.09	4.00
Nature solutions	4.12	3.92	3.84
	Academics/NGO	Local Government	Residents

Figure 4.3. A heat-map comparing mean ratings (1–5 scale) for sustainability indicators across three stakeholder groups (Local Government, Residents, Academics/NGO). Warmer colours indicate higher effectiveness ratings (4–5); cooler colours indicate lower ratings (1–3). The spatial dimension shows highest overall agreement (top rows), while social and economic dimensions show greatest divergence between stakeholder groups (lower rows).

Source: own elaboration.

Open-ended analysis (34) – a categorisation of challenges and improvements

This section provides an in-depth analysis of open-ended responses, where the participants identify the primary challenges hindering the effectiveness of local sustainable development strategies as well as suggest a single intervention that could most significantly enhance future strategic initiatives. The response rate was 53.6% ($n = 201$ of 375), and this qualitative data offers important insights into stakeholder perspectives on implementation barriers and strategic priorities. The analytical framework employed for this section comprised the following components:

- response rate and sample: 53.6% ($n=201$) of the survey respondents provided open-ended responses to challenge and improvement questions;
- coding scheme: twelve primary thematic categories identified through inductive analysis;

- multiple themes per response: the respondents frequently identified multiple challenges, enabling the richness of categorisation;
- stakeholder differentiation: an analysis examined how different stakeholder groups articulated challenges through functionally specific lenses.

The analysis reveals that stakeholders identify genuine systemic and operational barriers rather than expressing diffuse discontent. Table 4.1 presents the distribution of identified challenges across thematic categories.

Table 4.1. Top-challenge categories

Category	Challenges
1. Community engagement (28.4%) 57 mentions	– raising awareness and convincing society; – ensuring genuine (not tokenistic) participation; – activating passive residents.
2. Planning/Strategy quality (24.9%) 50 mentions	– aligning goals with real needs; – creating realistic implementation plans; – updating and adapting strategies.
3. Legal framework (12.9%) 26 mentions	– regulatory complexity and contradictions; – the lack of legal certainty for long-term planning; – inflexible procedures.
4. Funding (12.9%) 26 mentions	– insufficient resources; – slow and complicated funding processes; – uncertainty about financing strategy goals.
5. Education/competence (10.4%) 21 mentions	– training for local government staff; – building the awareness of sustainable development; – developing facilitation and engagement skills.
6. Bureaucracy (9.0%) 18 mentions	– administrative complexity; – excessive paperwork; – time-consuming procedures.

Source: own elaboration.

Challenge 1: Community Engagement (28.4%, n=57). Community engagement is consistently identified as the most significant challenge across all respondent groups, although the emphasis and proposed solutions differ. This challenge includes both initiating resident participation and advancing participation beyond tokenistic consultation towards substantive co-determination processes.

The respondents' statements elucidate the underlying reasons for the divergent assessments of community engagement by residents and NGOs or academic professionals. Professionals generally focus on the existence of participatory processes, whereas residents prioritise whether these processes yield substantive influence over outcomes. This asymmetry is fundamental to understanding the participation paradox (see Text Box).

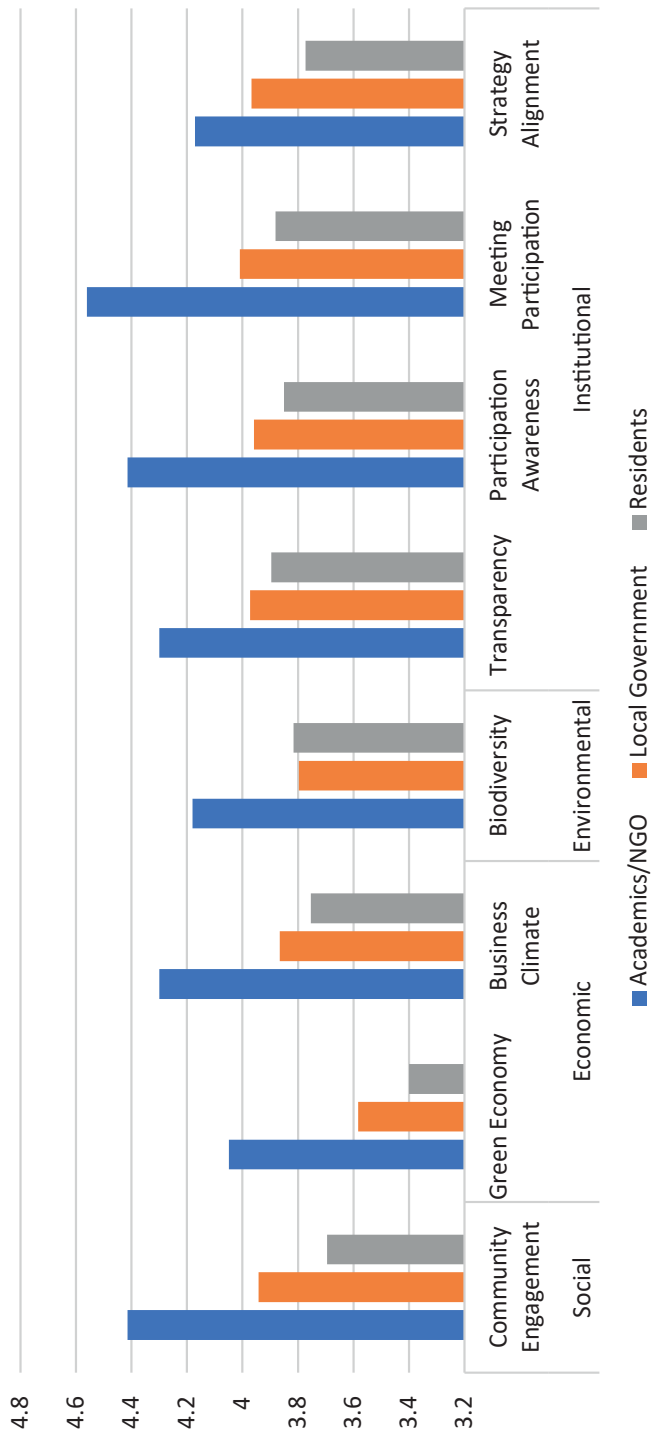


Figure 4.4. Top stakeholders' disagreements: eight sustainability indicators showing the greatest variation in ratings between stakeholder groups
Source: own elaboration.

Residents' voices: Residents Distinguish Consultation from Co-Decision

"We are asked for our opinion, but the final decisions are already made. We respond to options we did not create. That is not participation; that is approval-seeking."

— Respondent paraphrase (Poland, resident)

"For participation to be genuine, residents must be involved from the beginning – when the problem is defined and options are designed – not invited to choose among predetermined options."

— Respondent 287 (Poland, resident)

"The consultation is often a formality. Residents are invited to meetings, their comments are noted, but nothing changes. The strategy moves forward exactly as officials planned."

— Representative resident frustration (both countries)

"What residents want is transparency about how their feedback shapes decisions and accountability when promises are not kept."

— Respondent synthesis (Poland, local authority perspective)

Challenge 2: Planning and Strategy Quality (24.9%, n=50). The planning and strategy quality represents the second principal challenge category. The respondents highlight concerns about aligning strategic objectives with measurable community needs, establishing realistic implementation timelines and ensuring that strategies can be revised adaptively. This finding demonstrates that stakeholders perceive a substantial gap between strategic formulation and operational feasibility. Local government respondents particularly emphasise planning deficiencies, indicating that practitioners are facing challenges in translating abstract sustainability principles into actionable, context-specific interventions. "The goals of the strategy are abstract. Too many goals, too ambitious, unrealisable. Many empty words, little concrete action. Nothing about education, problems in schools, real support for housing needs." – Respondent from Poland, resident.

Challenge 3: Legal and Regulatory Frameworks (12.9%, n=26). Legal and regulatory frameworks represent the third principal challenge. The respondents identified the following specific issues: the complexity of regulatory systems; contradictory legal requirements across jurisdictional levels; and insufficient legal certainty for effective long-term strategic planning. This category warrants particular attention due to its significant implications for institutional capacity and governance effectiveness, particularly in multi-level governance contexts where vertical coordination is often problematic.

The distribution of challenges by stakeholder group demonstrates distinct patterns based on stakeholder roles, indicating that each group perceives implementation obstacles from a functionally specific perspective (Table 4.2).

Table 4.2. Challenges by stakeholder type

Academics/NGOs	– community engagement (9 mentions) – bureaucracy (9 mentions, unique emphasis) – education (6 mentions)
Local Governments	– community engagement (40 mentions) – planning (38 mentions) – funding (18 mentions)
Residents	– implementation issues (8 mentions) – community engagement (8 mentions) – planning (6 mentions)

Source: own elaboration.

Each stakeholder group interprets implementation obstacles according to their specific functional perspective. *Academics* and NGOs primarily highlight process-related barriers, such as bureaucratic procedures and coordination challenges. *Residents* tend to focus on gaps in outcomes, particularly regarding the effectiveness of implementation and the achievement of tangible results. *Local Government* representatives emphasise systemic issues, including challenges related to planning, monitoring, and institutional capacity.

Pertaining to the primary discrepancies and the most substantial disparities in assessments, several domains prevail. Specifically, there is a focus on local community engagement, planning issues, legal frameworks, and financing. Furthermore, considerable disparities have been identified in the evaluation of education, implementation, bureaucracy, and cooperation (Figure 4.5). This observation invites further consideration.

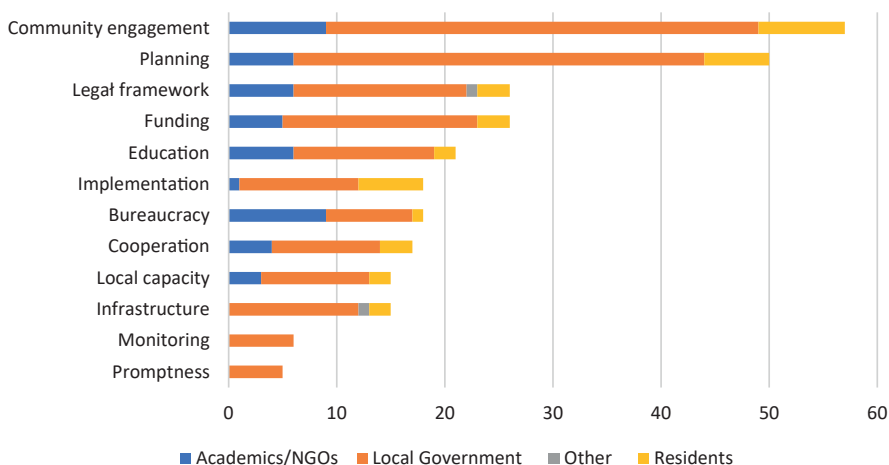


Figure 4.5. A comparison of challenge priorities across three stakeholder groups showing different emphasis patterns

Source: own elaboration.

The predominance of specific rather than generic challenges in stakeholder responses demonstrates a high level of strategic sophistication. The respondents seldom express vague dissatisfaction; instead, they identify concrete obstacles such as particular regulatory provisions, specific coordination failures, or clearly defined gaps in communication. This level of specificity underscores the value of open-ended inquiry for capturing implementation knowledge that structured surveys may fail to reveal.

A counter-intuitive finding emerges from a cross-tabulation analysis: those respondents who articulate specific challenges assign HIGHER ratings to dimensions than those who do not provide detailed responses (Table 4.3). The 0.287-point gap between detailed responders and non-responders demonstrates that critical engagement does not equal negativity. Rather, engaged critics function as knowledgeable observers who simultaneously acknowledge challenges and perceive progress. From the analytical perspective, this finding challenges a common assumption in participatory governance and development studies, namely that critical assessments necessarily indicate dissatisfaction or resistance. The evidence presented here suggests the opposite. Articulated criticism appears to be a marker of engagement, competence, and perceived agency rather than disengagement. In this sense, the absence of critique – or the provision of minimal, undifferentiated responses – may reflect social distance, informational gaps, or resignation rather than approval. This has important implications for how participation and effectiveness are conceptualised: strategies that generate silence can be less resilient than those that provoke informed critique.

Table 4.3. Challenge articulation and effectiveness ratings

Response Detail	n	Overall Score	Interpretation
Detailed responses (>150 characters)	32	4.184	HIGHEST – critical awareness + optimism
Medium responses (50-150 characters)	57	4.100	moderate engagement
Brief responses (<50 characters)	112	3.848	limited engagement
No open-ended response	174	3.897	possible disengagement

Source: own elaboration.

Indeed, stakeholders who articulate specific challenges often propose concrete improvements, indicating that critical perspectives are informed and invested in reform rather than characterised by cynical rejection. This interpretation is supported by the counter-intuitive finding that challenge-aware respondents rate dimensions 0.19 to 0.30 points higher than non-respondents (see Text Box).

Critical but Not Disengaged: Resident Proposals for Improvement

"The biggest challenges are clear, and I have ideas about solutions: Better communication, clearer goals aligned with real needs, continuous monitoring with honest feedback."

— Respondent 198 (Poland)

"Simplification and flexibility in implementation are crucial – modularity so we can adapt approaches to local context rather than applying rigid programmes everywhere."

— Respondent 301 (Poland)

"Education about sustainable development is what would most improve future strategies. We need shared understanding among residents and officials."

— Respondent 267 (Poland)

"The strategies will succeed if we focus on what residents need: stable employment, access to services, the ability to keep families in the village."

— Representative resident proposal (both countries)

A qualitative analysis of open-ended responses was implemented across the study and enabled the identification of domains of discontent and the challenges faced. The investigation focused on identifying the areas of disagreement among stakeholders (Table 4.4, Figure 4.6). The most significant perception gaps indicate fundamental discrepancies between the way in which professionals design programmes and the way in which residents experience them. Stakeholders reach a consensus on the importance of tangible infrastructure; however, there is a fundamental divergence of opinions on the efficacy of participation and the deliverability of economic strategies (Table 4.5). These discrepancies serve to illuminate the multifaceted nature of lived experiences. A critical observation is that basic services such as health care and education generate minimal disagreement. Significant conflicts arise concerning the quality of participation, economic transitions, and the extent to which development processes empower local communities.

Table 4.4. Questions with greatest stakeholder disagreement

Question	Range	Stakeholder group		
		Academics/NGOs	Local Governments	Residents
1. Community engagement	0.71	4.41	3.94	3.70
2. Meeting participation	0.68	4.56	4.01	3.88
3. Green economy	0.65	4.05	3.58	3.40
4. Participation awareness	0.56	4.42	3.96	3.85
5. Business climate	0.55	4.30	3.87	3.75

Source: own elaboration.

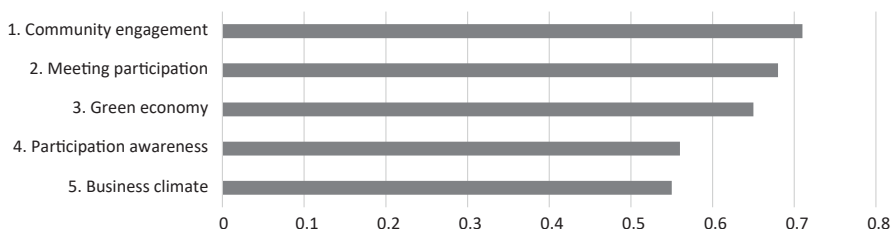


Figure 4.6. Where stakeholders disagree most – top 5 indicators with the greatest disagreement

Source: own elaboration.

Table 4.5. Questions with greatest stakeholder agreement

Question	Range	All groups mean value
1. Natural resources management	0.03	3.90
2. Income inequality	0.11	3.60
3. Spatial development plans	0.15	4.10

Source: own elaboration.

Community engagement (28.4%) and planning quality (24.9%) were identified as the most significant challenges. Funding, as the fourth most common concern, was ranked at 12.9%. Process-related issues are of primary importance, while resource constraints are of secondary significance (Figure 4.7). These results indicate that stakeholders' expectations extend beyond financial contributions, highlighting the need for improved processes and greater engagement. More than 28% of the respondents identified genuine community engagement as the primary challenge, which is a concern that significantly outweighs funding issues. The central challenge is not the lack of resources, but, rather, the need for authentic participation, realistic planning, and effective coordination. Process-related challenges – including

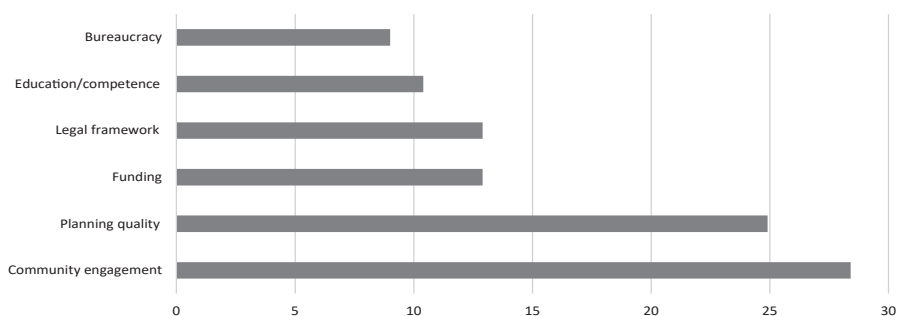


Figure 4.7. Biggest challenges by respondents – the percentage of open-ended responses (n=201, 53.6% response rate)

Source: own elaboration.

engagement, planning, and bureaucracy – are more prominent than resource-related concerns such as funding. The respondents underscore the importance of procedural approaches over the mere availability of resources.

A deep analysis of open-ended responses

This section extends the analysis through a multidimensional examination of 201 open-ended responses across four analytical dimensions. *Thematic content analysis* identifies substantive categories of concern. *Sentiment and tone analysis* characterises the emotional register and critical orientation. An analysis of proposed solutions examines stakeholder recommendations. *Advanced cross-tabulations* analyse the relationships between response characteristics and dimensional performance ratings. This integrated approach enables the identification of patterns, meta-themes, and the logical coherence of stakeholder reasoning across multiple analytical levels.

Part 1. Thematic content analysis

A thematic analysis indicates that respondent concerns are organised around three primary meta-themes:

- (1) relational factors (trust, cooperation, communication);
- (2) process factors (participation mechanisms, planning procedures, monitoring systems);
- (3) structural factors (legal frameworks, institutional capacity, resource allocation).

Approximately 47% of proposed solutions emphasise process improvements over resource increases, indicating a broad recognition that systemic reorganisation can be more effective than incremental financial allocation.

The thematic content analysis demonstrates that the respondents distinguish between participation mechanisms and participatory outcomes. Several respondents explicitly differentiate between formal consultation processes and authentic deliberation in which resident input influences decisions. Representative comments illustrate this distinction: “Participation must be mandatory and genuine at the strategy creation stage, not merely consultative.”; “The most important thing is that people are heard.” This distinction holds theoretical significance, because it challenges the conventional metrics of participation that measure attendance or consultation events without evaluating whether genuine influence is exerted.

The analysis also reveals that stakeholders focus on capacity and competence dimensions. Several respondents identify insufficient training of local government staff; inadequate awareness of sustainable development principles among residents; and limited facilitation skills among strategy coordinators. These observations indicate that technical capacity represents a distinct category of challenges that is complementary to, yet separate from, resource constraints.

Table 4.6 presents detailed challenge themes with precise mention counts and percentages. It also reorders these same themes by stakeholder sentiment to reveal whether certain groups express challenges more frequently. For example, “bureaucratic complexity” (3.98% overall) represents 18.18% of Academics’/NGOs’ concerns but only 2.80% of Local Government’s concerns.

Table 4.6. Detailed challenge themes

Theme	Mentions	Percentage
Bureaucratic complexity	8	3.98
Communication gaps	7	3.48
Awareness-raising	3	1.49
Centralisation	3	1.49
Legal barriers	3	1.49
Resident passivity	2	0.995
Municipal capacity	2	0.995
Political commitment	2	0.995
Monitoring gaps	2	0.995
Inter-sectoral coordination	1	0.4975
Insufficient funding	1	0.4975
Slow procedures	1	0.4975
Low participation	0	0.0
The strategy–reality gap	0	0.0
Short-termism	0	0.0

Source: own elaboration.

Part 2. Sentiment and tone analysis

A sentiment analysis of open-ended responses utilises a four-category framework: Negative/Critical, which emphasises problems without proposing solutions; Constructive/Solution-Oriented, which identifies problems and offers specific remedies; Hopeful/Optimistic, which expresses confidence in the potential for improvement; and Frustrated/Resigned, which conveys despair or a sense of abandoned hope.

The overall sentiment distribution is as follows: 60.6% negative or critical, 29.6% constructive or solution-oriented, 8.5% hopeful or optimistic, and 1.4% frustrated or resigned. Critical methodological significance emerges from this configuration, as it challenges the assumption that a critical voice necessarily reflects negativity or disengagement. The considerable proportion of constructive responses (nearly 30%) demonstrates that stakeholders can identify barriers while also proposing specific interventions. This pattern suggests a form of engaged critical realism rather than a simple complaint. Table 4.7 presents sentiment distribution across stakeholder groups.

Table 4.7. Sentiment distribution by stakeholder group

Stakeholder group	Negative/ Critical (%)	Construc- tive (%)	Hopeful (%)	Frustrated (%)	Average re- sponse length
Academics/NGOs	68.2	31.8	4.5	0.0	127 characters
Local Government	62.0	28.0	6.0	0.0	154 characters
Residents	58.3	25.0	16.7	8.3	98 characters

Source: own elaboration.

Local government officials provide the longest responses (154 characters on average), indicating a tendency to articulate implementation challenges with greater detail and specificity. This pattern likely results from their direct involvement with administrative procedures and resource limitations.

Residents display a broader emotional spectrum, with higher levels of optimism (16.7% compared to 6–8% among professionals) and greater frustration (8.3% compared to 0%). This variability in emotional response can be attributed to residents' limited involvement in implementation processes, which increases their susceptibility to both hope and disappointment regarding potential outcomes.

Academics and NGO representatives demonstrate the highest critical ratio but exhibit lower levels of optimism, indicating that they assess initiatives using analytical frameworks that emphasise structural barriers.

The positive correlation between critical awareness and higher effectiveness ratings warrants particular attention. Those respondents who articulated specific challenges of at least 150 characters assigned a mean effectiveness score of 4.184 on the 5-point scale, which substantially exceeded the 3.897 score assigned by non-respondents.

The table in Appendix C. provides challenge sentiment analysis including original responses from the survey participants. The sentiment analysis reveals distinct emotional framings among stakeholder groups. Local Government primarily adopts a constructive or solutions-oriented stance (48%), followed by negative or critical sentiment (45%), and a limited expression of hopefulness (7%). Residents display a more balanced distribution, with negative or critical sentiment prevailing (57%), alongside constructive responses (29%) and hopeful sentiment (14%). Academics and NGOs exhibit a similar pattern: negative or critical sentiment (57%), constructive (29%), and hopeful (14%). Notably, a unique frustrated or resigned sentiment is present only within the Academics/NGOs group.

Constructive sentiment patterns. Local Government and Academics/NGOs groups tend to frame challenges as solvable through specific strategies, including infrastructural improvement, asset distribution, procedural reform, stakeholder engagement, and deregulation. In contrast, Residents seldom utilise constructive framing, more often characterising implementation barriers as intractable, e.g., inadequate budgets, low participation, and centralisation.

Critical sentiment content. The Local Government's criticism focuses on institutional constraints, including bureaucratic complexity, financing limitations,

coordination failures, and low community participation. Residents emphasise deficits in access and communication, such as administrative disengagement, inadequate consultation, and information gaps. Academics and NGOs primarily critique system design flaws, including excessive bureaucracy, rigid procedures, and insufficient flexibility.

Hopeful sentiment. The Local Government expresses cautious optimism regarding financing certainty and the development of new mechanisms. Residents and Academics/NGOs articulate more idealistic perspectives, emphasising inclusive participation and asset-based rural development, respectively.

Despite differences in sentiment labels, all groups identify the same core barriers: participation deficiency, coordination failure, and the scarcity of resources. Variations in sentiment reflect differing framings of these barriers as either solvable (constructive) or structural (critical), rather than divergent barrier identification.

Part 3. An analysis of proposed solutions

An analysis of the proposed improvements demonstrates a pronounced emphasis on process-oriented solutions rather than resource-focused approaches (Table 4.8).

Table 4.8. An analysis of proposed solutions

Solution category	Mentions	Percentage	Interpretation
Stronger participation	6	3.0%	co-decision mechanisms
Education/training	6	3.0%	capacity-building
Long-term strategy thinking	5	2.5%	extended planning horizons
Simplification of procedures	3	1.5%	reduced bureaucratic burden
Enhanced flexibility	3	1.5%	adaptive approaches
Better communication	2	1.0%	information transparency
Monitoring/evaluation	2	1.0%	progress tracking systems
Decentralisation	2	1.0%	local control enhancement
Other improvements	3	1.5%	various structural reforms
No/Other responses (aggregate)	162	80.6%	no specific solution proposed

Source: own elaboration.

Emphasising process-oriented solutions is consistent with social capital and institutional theory, both of which suggest that relational and procedural characteristics often have a greater impact on development outcomes than resource availability alone. Stakeholders proposed the following recommendations:

- simplifying application procedures to minimise bureaucratic complexity;
- increasing public awareness through the implementation of community education programmes;

- developing regular monitoring systems to assess progress and facilitate adaptive management;
- adopting decentralised decision-making structures to enhance local autonomy.

Particular attention should be given to simplification and flexibility. Several respondents have recommended the following measures:

- adopting modular project designs to facilitate adaptation to local contexts;
- removing unnecessary bureaucratic requirements;
- providing capacity-building support to improve access for smaller organisations and less-experienced stakeholders.

These proposals acknowledge that procedural complexity creates access barriers that disproportionately impact marginalised or less-resourced community groups. Practical recommendations should closely align with stakeholder input, emphasising that an evidence-based policy reform depends on the systemic consideration of improvements suggested by stakeholders with implementation experience, rather than relying exclusively on expert-driven innovation (see Text Box).

Evidence-Based Reform Agenda: What Stakeholders Propose

“Increase resident participation in strategy creation and implementation through mandatory genuine engagement mechanisms – not just consultation, but co-decision.”

— Respondent synthesis (both countries, multiple respondent types)

“Simplify procedures, reduce bureaucracy, make strategies understandable to ordinary citizens who lack professional expertise.”

— Respondent 178 (Poland)

“Establish regular, honest results monitoring and create procedures that encourage continuous learning and adaptation as conditions change.”

— Respondent 198 (Poland)

“Shift to longer-term strategic planning while maintaining flexibility – a 3–5-year horizon seems optimal for balancing commitment with adaptability.”

— Representative reform proposal (both countries)

Part 4. Advanced cross-tabulations

This section advances the analysis through systemic cross-tabulation, examining how effectiveness perceptions interact with stakeholder characteristics, engagement depth, and dimensional performance. Cross-tabulation analysis enables an investigation of whether effects are uniform across subgroups or whether critical patterns of heterogeneity exist that univariate analysis obscures. The analyses presented here reveal three critical patterns challenging conventional assumptions about stakeholder perception: 1) extreme bifurcation in resident effectiveness assessment; 2) a positive correlation between challenge articulation and effectiveness ratings; and 3) distinctive role-based patterns in how different stakeholders perceive barriers.

→ Cross-tabulation 1. Stakeholder group x Effectiveness x Outcomes

This cross-tabulation examines whether the relationship between perceived effectiveness (Yes = effective, Partially = partially effective) and overall assessment score varies by stakeholder group. The analysis tests whether effectiveness perceptions have a uniform meaning across groups or whether groups interpret effectiveness categories differently.

Table 4.9. Empirical findings

Stakeholder group	Effectiveness rating	n	Overall score	Mean difference from Partially
Residents	Yes	13	4.325	+0.787
Residents	Partially	15	3.538	–
Local Government	Yes	64	4.096	+0.248
Local Government	Partially	54	3.848	–
Academics/NGOs	Yes	21	4.159	+0.139
Academics/NGOs	Partially	9	4.020	–

Source: own elaboration.

A notable finding is the pronounced bifurcation in resident perceptions. Those residents who rate strategies as effective” assign a mean score of 4.325, which is the highest among all stakeholder-effectiveness combinations. In contrast, those who rate strategies as partially effective assign a mean score of 3.538, which is the lowest rating observed. The difference between these groups (0.787 points) is three times greater than the corresponding gap for local government (0.248 points) and significantly exceeds that for academics or NGOs (0.139 points).

This pattern indicates fundamentally different cognitive frameworks among stakeholder groups. For residents, the perceived effectiveness is largely binary: strategies are viewed as either highly effective (score 4.3 or above) or largely ineffective (score 3.5). In contrast, government officials and experts assess effectiveness on a more graduated scale, with those perceiving effectiveness assigning moderately high scores (4.0–4.2) and those perceiving partial effectiveness assigning only slightly lower scores (3.8–4.0).

Several mechanisms can explain the emergence of this pattern. First, exposure to implementation complexity differentiates perceptions. Government officials and experts, who operate within these systems, recognise that perfect implementation is unattainable due to funding constraints, coordination challenges, unforeseen obstacles, and required adaptations. In contrast, residents, who lack detailed knowledge of implementation processes, can perceive outcomes in more dichotomous terms: either “the strategy worked” or “it did not.”

Second, information asymmetry shapes the assessment criteria. Residents primarily evaluate effectiveness based on visible improvements in their daily lives, such as new infrastructure, increased economic opportunities, or enhanced service

quality. In contrast, government officials and experts consider additional factors, including institutional processes, budget allocation, and progress towards intermediate objectives that are not apparent to residents. These broader information sources enable more nuanced evaluations.

Third, cognitive simplification can influence resident evaluations. When lacking detailed knowledge of system operations, residents can rely on straightforward decision rules. Those experiencing a meaningful improvement tend to rate a strategy as “effective” and assign a high score, while those not experiencing such an improvement rate it as “partially effective” and assign a low score. The intermediate category can be underutilised because residents can not view modest system improvements as sufficient to warrant the label “effective.”

The bifurcation pattern suggests that for residents, effectiveness operates as a threshold phenomenon: below the threshold (no visible improvement), strategies are rated poorly; above the threshold (visible improvement occurs), strategies are rated well. For government and experts, effectiveness operates as a continuous variable: small improvements register as modest effectiveness; larger improvements register as stronger effectiveness.

This distinction has significant implications for strategy communication. Government reports that highlight percentage improvements in specific indicators can fulfil official assessment requirements. However, residents often focus on a more fundamental question: “Is my life significantly better?” Strategies that achieve measurable progress, such as a 15% improvement, can be considered “partially effective” by government standards but “ineffective” by residents if the change is not perceptible in their daily lives.

This finding suggests that strategy communication should address the threshold effect explicitly. Rather than reporting technical progress metrics, communication should focus on visible, tangible improvements affecting resident experience. Conversely, strategies should design implementation to achieve above-threshold improvements in resident experience, not merely measurable progress towards technical objectives.

→ Cross-tabulation 2. Response detail × Overall assessment score

This cross-tabulation investigates the relationship between the depth of engagement with the survey, measured by character count in open-ended responses, and overall effectiveness assessment. The analysis evaluates a central assumption in participatory research: whether those residents who provide detailed articulations of challenges tend to rate strategies lower due to their critical perspective, whether engagement is unrelated to assessment, or whether a positive relationship exists. Those respondents providing detailed responses rate strategies 0.287 points higher than brief responders and 0.286 points higher than non-responders (Table 4.10).

Table 4.10. Response details on overall assessment scores

Response detail	n	Mean overall score	Standard deviation	Distribution percentile
Detailed (>150 characters)	32	4.18	0.88	75th
Medium (50-150 characters)	57	4.10	0.95	68th
Brief (<50 characters)	112	3.85	1.10	45th
No response	174	3.90	1.16	48th

Source: own elaboration.

The interpretation suggests that critical engagement does not equal negativity. This finding directly challenges a common assumption in the development discourse that critically-engaged populations rate interventions lower. The data reveals the opposite relationship: individuals providing detailed articulations of challenges rate overall effectiveness higher than those offering minimal engagement.

This pattern has significant implications for interpreting resident voice. Critically-engaged residents should not be characterised as chronically dissatisfied. Instead, they demonstrate critical optimism, exhibiting the capacity to recognise problems while also perceiving progress. Their criticism is constructive, identifying specific areas for improvement rather than dismissing the entire effort. The following three interpretations are considered together as complementary:

- (1) *The Strategic Awareness Effect*. Those residents who articulate detailed challenges demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of how strategies function. They recognise the impossibility of perfect implementation, understand the trade-offs inherent in strategic choices, and can distinguish legitimate implementation challenges from systemic failures. This sophistication enables more generous effectiveness ratings, as outcomes are contextualised within realistic expectations.
- (2) *The Engagement Gradient*. The level of detail in responses likely correlates with overall engagement. Those residents who invest effort in detailed written responses are generally more engaged with community development issues. Such residents attend community meetings, remain aware of strategy progress, and develop an appreciation for ongoing efforts. In contrast, non-responders can be disengaged from development issues, and their lower ratings can reflect disengagement rather than critical assessment.
- (3) *The Positive Selection Effect*. Residents holding more favourable views can be more motivated to participate in surveys and provide detailed responses, viewing survey participation as an opportunity to express an appreciation for development efforts. Conversely, those with highly negative views might decline to participate. This selection effect could produce a positive correlation between response detail and effectiveness ratings, regardless of what response detail actually measures.

The data provides a basis for evaluating which interpretation most plausibly explains the observed pattern. If Interpretation 3 (positive selection) were dominant, the non-response group would be expected to rate extremely low and the detailed response group extremely high, resulting in a sharp discontinuity. Instead, the data reveals a continuous gradient: detailed responders rate highest, medium responders are intermediate, and brief responders as well as non-responders are roughly equivalent and substantially lower. This gradient pattern better supports the interpretations 1 and 2 than the interpretation 3.

Additionally, a qualitative analysis of detailed responses reveals sophisticated problem identification alongside positive assessment. The respondents explicitly state views such as “The strategy is working, and here’s where it needs improvement” and “Progress has been real despite challenges.” This language pattern indicates that these respondents exhibit critical optimism rather than merely demonstrating a positive bias.

This finding has important implications for how development practitioners interpret resident feedback. Low ratings can reflect disengagement rather than informed criticism. Non-responsive residents assigning ratings of 3.9 out of 5 can represent a population genuinely unaware of strategy implementation rather than one that has carefully assessed the strategy and found it lacking. Conversely, detailed critical engagement indicates underlying optimism and commitment. Those residents who invest effort to articulate challenges demonstrate a belief in the possibility of improvement and a desire to contribute to it.

This finding suggests that practitioners should actively solicit detailed critical engagement from residents rather than viewing criticism as a threat. Residents capable of articulating detailed challenges are most likely to mobilise for strategy implementation, as they combine realistic assessment with underlying optimism. Strategies should establish mechanisms that enable a detailed articulation of challenges and demonstrate how feedback leads to strategic adjustment.

→ Cross-tabulation 3. Challenge themes by stakeholder type

This cross-tabulation analyses the types of implementation challenges identified by different stakeholder groups. The analysis is based on the premise that stakeholders with distinct functional roles perceive challenges through their specific organisational perspectives. Residents, who are primarily concerned with tangible outcomes, tend to identify implementation barriers. Government officials, responsible for managing systems, are more likely to highlight coordination and planning challenges. External experts, such as academics and NGO representatives, often focus on process-level issues, including bureaucratic inefficiency.

Table 4.11. Empirical findings – challenge emphasis by group

Challenge type	Academics/ NGOs (%)	Local Government (%)	Residents (%)	N (total mentions)
Bureaucracy	18.2	2.8	0.0	12
Capacity	0.0	0.8	0.0	1
Community engagement	20.5	16.0	10.9	32
Cooperation/coordination	9.1	4.0	4.1	11
Funding	11.4	6.8	4.1	16
Implementation	2.3	4.4	8.2	15
Monitoring	0.0	2.0	0.0	2
Planning	13.6	14.4	8.2	29
Total mentions	44	125	49	218

Source: own elaboration.

The study identified three distinctive group patterns:

- (1) *Academics/NGOs as Process Critics (Bureaucracy Emphasis)*. Academics and NGO representatives predominantly emphasise bureaucracy as an implementation challenge. Specifically, 18.2% of their challenge mentions address bureaucratic inefficiency, excessive procedures, and administrative burden. Although academics and NGO representatives constitute only 23% of the respondents, they account for 87% of all bureaucracy-related mentions in the dataset. In contrast, residents do not mention bureaucracy, and only 2.8% of government officials identify it as a challenge. This pattern reflects the external perspective on government systems. Academics and NGO workers, who approach these systems from outside, often regard bureaucratic procedures as obstacles to efficient implementation. In contrast, residents and government officials, who operate within these systems, perceive such procedures as necessary mechanisms for coordination rather than as barriers. Similarly, academics and NGO representatives place greater emphasis on cooperation and coordination challenges (9.1%) when compared to government officials and residents (both at 4%). This suggests that external observers perceive coordination problems as more significant than do those who operate within coordinated systems.
- (2) *Residents as Results-Focused (Implementation Emphasis)*. Residents uniquely emphasise the actual implementation of strategies. Specifically, 8.2% of resident challenge mentions focus on implementation barriers, compared to 4.4% for government officials and 2.3% for academics and NGO representatives. Although residents contribute fewer total challenge mentions than government officials (49 v. 125), they account for 55% of all implementation-focused mentions, despite representing only 29% of the respondents. This pattern highlights the resident focus on tangible outcomes. For residents, the central concern is whether strategies are being executed in practice. Implementation

barriers – such as the construction of promised infrastructure, the initiation of economic programmes, and the accessibility of services – are particularly salient to their lived experience. In contrast, government officials and experts, who are more attuned to the complexities of implementation, can prioritise upstream planning and coordination challenges over direct implementation barriers.

- (3) *Local Government as Systems Managers*. Government officials emphasise planning (14.4% of mentions) and monitoring (100% of mentions) as key challenges, reflecting the systems management perspective. Planning encompasses the complexity of strategy design, integration across sectors, and prioritisation among multiple objectives. Monitoring indicates the awareness that measuring progress is essential, yet often difficult. The government's complete monopoly on monitoring mentions (2% of their challenges) reflects that only government officials directly face the measurement and accountability requirements. Residents and Academics/NGOs do not oversee formal monitoring systems; consequently, monitoring challenges are invisible to them.

This cross-tabulation reveals role-based challenge perception specialisation: each stakeholder group perceives challenges through functional lenses of their organisational position:

- academics'/NGOs' lens: process efficiency, bureaucratic rationality, inter-sectoral cooperation;
- government lens: system management, planning complexity, monitoring and accountability;
- resident lens: tangible implementation, visible results, actual accessibility.

These perspectives are not contradictory but complementary. An effective strategy requires efficient bureaucratic processes enabling timely decision-making (academics'/NGOs' concern) as well as sound planning and coordination across government sectors (governmental concern); actual implementation producing tangible results (residential concern). A key problem is that the current strategy development and implementation often privilege certain perspectives while marginalising others. When planning is emphasised at the expense of implementation, strategies can result in well-designed plans that are poorly executed. Similarly, prioritising efficiency over coordination can lead to streamlined procedures that fail to address cross-sectoral integration challenges.

Strategy improvement requires integrating multiple stakeholder perspectives on challenges. Rather than having government officials define priority challenges and then attempt to address them, strategies should explicitly solicit challenge identification from all stakeholder groups, and then organise an implementation addressing challenges identified by each group.

→ Cross-tabulation 4. Dimension performance x Challenge awareness (response rate)

This cross-tabulation examines a counter-intuitive hypothesis, namely whether individuals who perform highly on specific sustainability dimensions are more or

less likely to articulate challenges related to those dimensions. The null hypothesis predicts a negative relationship, suggesting that those who rate dimensions highly can avoid critical engagement. In contrast, the alternative hypothesis posits a positive relationship, proposing that the sophisticated understanding that is required to rate a dimension highly also enables the identification of areas for improvement.

Table 4.12. Empirical findings – challenge response rates by dimension performance

Dimension	Higher-performing group (%)	Lower-performing group (%)	Difference (percentage points)	n (Higher)	n (Lower)
Environmental	66.2	54.5	+11.7 points	43	30
Institutional	62.8	52.6	+10.3 points	39	29
Economic	66.7	60.0	+6.7 points	36	30
Social	63.0	57.0	+6.0 points	40	33
Spatial	62.8	60.6	+2.3 points	39	33

Source: own elaboration.

The statistical significance of the results is outlined as follows. The observed gap ranges from 2.3 to 11.7 percentage points, with the most significant effects observed in the environmental dimension and the institutional dimension.

The interpretation can be posited as the phenomenon of the Strategic Awareness Effect. A strong positive correlation between high dimension ratings and challenge articulation reveals a critical finding: sophisticated understanding enables both positive assessment and problem identification. Individuals who rate the environmental dimension highly – indicating effective environmental management – are 11.7 percentage points more likely to articulate environmental challenges than those who rate it low. This pattern is consistent across all dimensions, although the magnitude varies. This finding challenges the assumption that critical engagement necessarily indicates dissatisfaction. Instead, it demonstrates that the capacity for detailed challenge articulation correlates with higher effectiveness ratings.

The following three mechanisms are posited as explanatory factors for the observed pattern:

- (1) *Sophistication and Strategic Awareness*. Individuals capable of articulating specific dimension challenges demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of how that dimension functions. They recognise the characteristics of effective environmental management and can identify specific areas for improvement. This sophistication is the same capacity that enables them to recognise environmental progress and assign high effectiveness ratings. Conversely, individuals who rate dimensions low can lack sophisticated understanding. They can recognise that the environmental condition is “not ideal”, but are unable to articulate specific challenges. This assessment can reflect genuine environmental problems,

which warrant a low rating, or can indicate disengagement or the lack of awareness, resulting in a low rating without substantive understanding.

- (2) *Engagement Gradient*. Variation in response rates likely reflects differences in underlying engagement. Those residents who are highly engaged with the environment are more likely to both rate environmental effectiveness and articulate environmental challenges. A low response rate among those rating the environment low can indicate disengagement from environmental issues, rather than critical engagement.
- (3) *Mechanism: Success Breeds Engagement*. Those residents who experience environmental improvement may become more engaged with environmental issues, which leads them to notice and articulate remaining challenges. In contrast, those not experiencing improvement can disengage entirely from environmental concerns. This mechanism contributes to the observed positive correlation.

The magnitude of effects varies substantially across dimensions. The environmental dimension and the institutional dimension has the largest effects (11.7 and 10.3 percentage points, respectively). These two dimensions exhibit the largest response rate gaps, suggesting that these dimensions require the most sophisticated understanding for accurate evaluation. Environmental effectiveness depends on knowledge of ecological processes and long-term sustainability, while institutional effectiveness relies on understanding governance mechanisms and coordination capacity. Only individuals with sufficient sophistication to rate these dimensions highly can articulate specific challenges.

The pronounced gap in the institutional dimension is particularly significant: individuals who rate institutional effectiveness highly are 10.3 percentage points more likely to articulate institutional challenges. This finding suggests that institutional sophistication constitutes relatively specialised knowledge that is not distributed across the population in a uniform way.

The economic dimension and the social dimension has moderate effects (6.7 and 6.0 percentage points, respectively). Challenges in these two dimensions can be more readily apparent to the general population. Residents can identify economic barriers, such as limited job opportunities or low wages, without requiring sophisticated economic knowledge. Social challenges, including community conflict or low participation, are similarly observable without specialised expertise. Thus, the gap between high and low scores is narrowing.

The spatial dimension has the smallest effect (2.3 percentage points); it shows the smallest response rate gap. This likely reflects that spatial infrastructure and connectivity are the most directly observable and the least dependent on specialised knowledge. Any resident can observe whether roads are good, services accessible, and infrastructure available. Consequently, spatial rating and spatial challenge articulation are only modestly correlated with the engagement level.

The positive correlation between high ratings and challenge response requires careful interpretation to avoid false inference. A false inference: "High ratings

indicate satisfaction; low response from low raters indicates their satisfaction.” A correct inference: “High ratings accompanied by high challenge articulation indicate sophisticated critical optimism. Low ratings accompanied by low challenge articulation can indicate genuine problems or disengagement and the lack of understanding.”

The distinction is critical: strategies responding to low ratings by assuming that residents are satisfied with the *status quo* will fail. A more appropriate response is investigating whether low ratings reflect (a) genuine problems requiring strategy revision, or (b) disengagement requiring increased information and participation in the strategy.

This finding suggests that challenge articulation should be actively solicited, particularly from high performers. Those rating dimensions high and articulating challenges are precisely those most likely to mobilise for implementation. Their detailed understanding means they can be productive partners in strategy refinement. Conversely, strategy should investigate low responders: are they satisfied (suggesting that a strategy is succeeding) or disengaged (suggesting that a strategy requires better communication)? A simple conclusion is that non-response indicates satisfaction risks, ignoring legitimate problems.

Integrated synthesis – cross-tabulation insights. A collective examination of the four cross-tabulations reveals three overarching cross-cutting patterns/paradigms:

- (1) *Engagement Heterogeneity.* All four cross-tabulations demonstrate substantial heterogeneity in engagement. Some residents rate highly and engage deeply (bifurcation pattern), while others articulate challenges while still providing high ratings (the response detail pattern). Certain individuals specialise in identifying specific challenge types (group pattern), and some rate highly on particular dimensions while simultaneously identifying challenges within those same dimensions (the dimension pattern). This heterogeneity indicates that a univariate analysis can obscure important variations. For example, the overall effectiveness means of 3.85 out of 5 conceals the fact that some residents rate above 4.3, while others rate as low as 3.5. Furthermore, variation across stakeholder groups often masks the reality that within-group heterogeneity frequently exceeds differences between groups.
- (2) *Sophistication and Engagement Correlation.* Across all four analyses, increased sophistication – measured by detailed engagement, dimensional understanding, or challenge articulation – correlates with higher effectiveness ratings. This consistent positive correlation challenges the assumption that critical residents are chronically dissatisfied. Instead, these residents demonstrate critical optimism and sophisticated assessment.
- (3) *Perspective Specialisation.* Different stakeholder groups perceive challenges through distinct functional lenses. Residents engage at varying depth levels, and differing understandings of dimensions produce unique challenge patterns.

Rather than seeking uniformity or consensus, effective strategies should integrate diverse perspectives and engagement styles.

4.2. What matters most for success: community trust or cooperation with authorities?

Eight pairings of question sets were analysed to examine differences and complementarities.

- (1) Effectiveness perception and dimension scores were compared. The overall mean difference between the „Effective” and „Ineffective” groups was 0.626 points. Participants who rated LDS as effective assigned higher scores across all dimensions: Social (4.145 vs. 3.800; difference = 0.345), Economic (4.063 vs. 3.360; difference = 0.703), Environmental (4.078 vs. 3.460; difference = 0.618), Institutional (4.141 vs. 3.443; difference = 0.698), and Spatial (4.266 vs. 3.500; difference = 0.766), with the largest difference observed in the spatial dimension. These results indicate consistently higher evaluations across all dimensions among respondents who perceived LDS as effective. The pattern suggests relatively uniform differences across dimensions rather than isolated, dimension-specific effects.

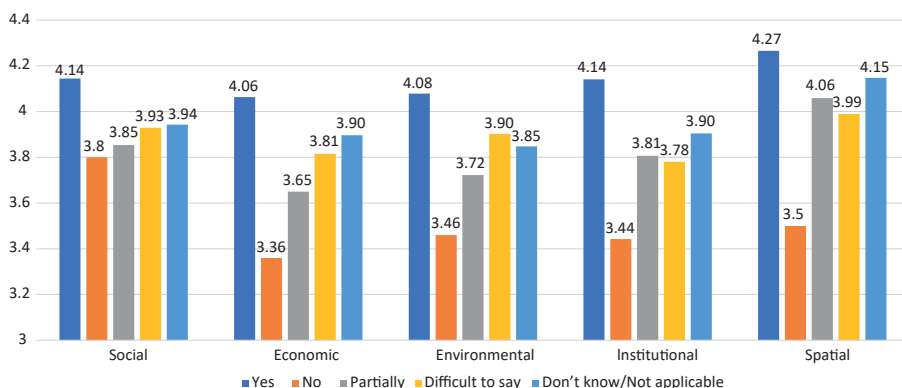


Figure 4.8. A comparison of five sustainability dimension scores across different effectiveness perception categories

Source: own elaboration.

- (2) Success factors and dimension scores were compared. Each factor's effect on overall ratings was measured by comparing respondents who identified it against those who did not. Community trust had the strongest effect (+0.251 points; identified by 179 respondents, 51.3%; 4.065 vs. 3.814), followed by cooperation with authorities (+0.230; 224 respondents, 64.2%; 4.025 vs. 3.794) and experience in cooperation (+0.217; 179 respondents, 51.3%; 4.048 vs. 3.831). Structural factors had weaker effects: theoretical knowledge (+0.121; 97 respondents, 27.8%; 4.031 vs. 3.910) and developed self-government, which

was almost negligible (+0.049; 169 respondents, 48.4%; 3.970 vs. 3.920). Relational factors such as trust and cooperation appear to matter more than structural ones such as institutional development or theoretical knowledge, which supports the effectiveness of bottom-up, relationship-focused approaches.

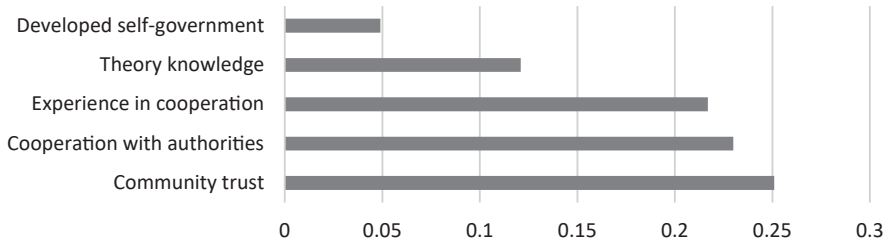


Figure 4.9. The quantitative impact of different success factors on overall sustainability dimension ratings

Source: own elaboration.

- (3) Engagement level and dimension ratings were compared. Mean dimension scores did not increase linearly with involvement. Respondents reporting some engagement scored highest (4.084; $n = 18$), those not engaged scored lowest (3.886; $n = 198$), and the actively engaged fell in between (3.975; $n = 148$). This „optimal observer” pattern may reflect that moderately involved participants have enough information to assess outcomes comprehensively without the fatigue or discouragement of deep involvement; alternatively, they may represent a subgroup characterised by consistently positive experiences.

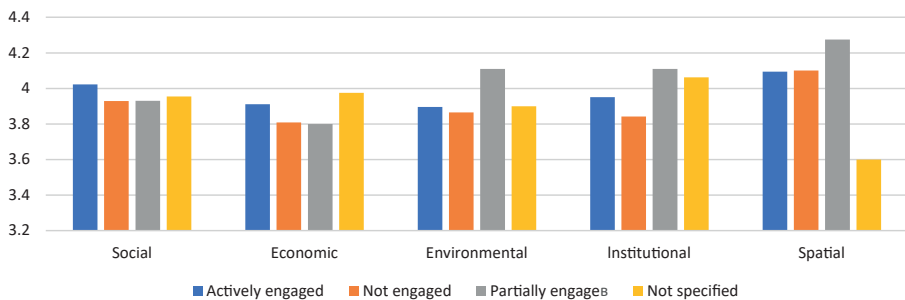


Figure 4.10. Engagement Level v. Ratings / Mean dimension scores by actual engagement in LDS processes

Source: own elaboration.

- (4) Community-engagement ratings and actual participation were compared. A participation paradox was confirmed. By engagement level, actively engaged respondents rated community engagement higher than the not-engaged (4.04 vs. 3.82; gap = 0.22 points). The contrast was sharper across stakeholder

groups: academics and NGOs gave the highest rating (4.42), followed by local government (3.94) and residents (3.70), a gap of 0.72 points. The participants most involved in engagement mechanisms rated them highest, whereas ordinary residents – the intended beneficiaries – rated them lowest. This indicates that participation mechanisms work better for professionals than for the broader community, an important qualification to bottom-up development theory.

- (5) Implementation period and effectiveness were compared. Perceived effectiveness rose with strategy duration. Among strategies running under three years ($n = 72$), 25.0% were rated effective; this rose to 33.7% at three to five years ($n = 105$) and 35.5% beyond five years ($n = 125$). Longer implementation periods are thus associated with higher effectiveness ratings, suggesting that sustainable outcomes take time to become evident. However, longer durations also carried persistent uncertainty, with roughly a quarter of respondents answering „hard to say” (24.2% in the longest group), highlighting the difficulty of maintaining strategic focus and evaluating long-term impact.

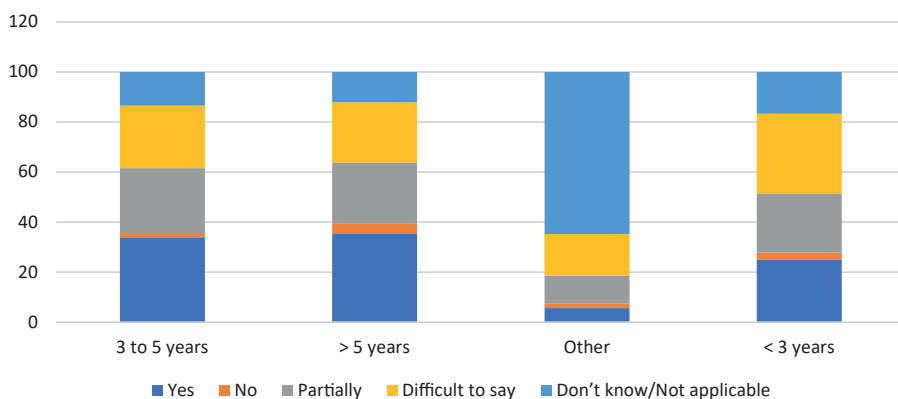


Figure 4.11. Effectiveness perception by strategy duration

Source: own elaboration.

- (6) Implementation scale and dimension scores were compared. Scale clearly affected outcomes. City-level strategies ($n = 47$) performed best overall (4.055), leading on the Social (4.185) and Spatial (4.200) dimensions. Village-level strategies ($n = 190$) scored lowest overall (3.878), including the weakest Social (3.913) and Economic (3.788) scores. Regional strategies ($n = 50$) performed solidly overall (3.985) and led on the Institutional dimension (4.122). City-level strategies may benefit from greater resources and administrative capacity, while village-level strategies are constrained by limited resources, and regional strategies show particular strength in institutional coordination, suggesting that approaches should be tailored to the scale of implementation.

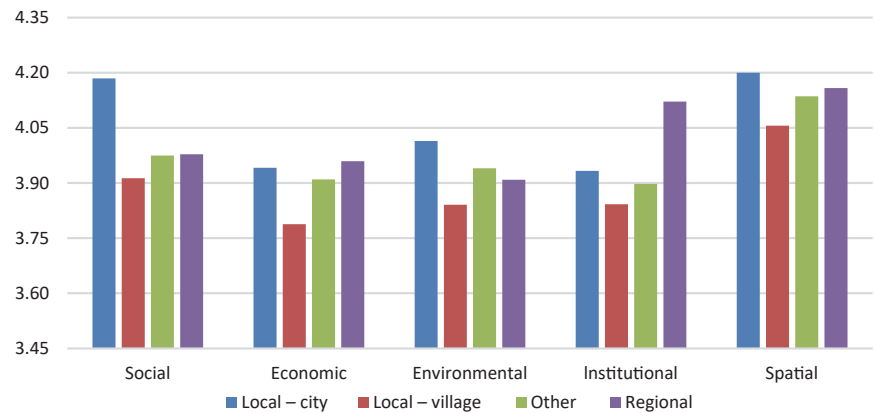


Figure 4.12. A comparison of sustainability dimension scores across different implementation scales

Source: own elaboration.

(7) The number of success factors identified and overall ratings were compared. A positive but diminishing relationship emerged. Overall ratings rose from 3.69 for those identifying one factor to 3.77 (two), 4.01 (three), 4.04 (four), 4.25

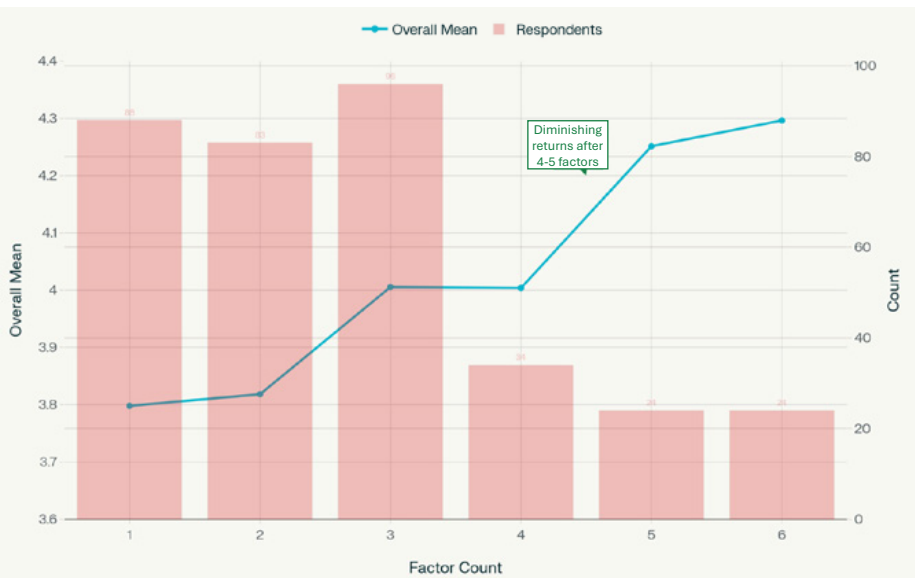


Figure 4.13. Success Factor Quantity v. Overall Ratings/Correlation between the proportion of success factors identified by the respondents and their mean ratings for sustainability dimensions

Source: own elaboration.

(five), and 4.29 (six), with gains levelling off after four or five factors. Respondents identifying more success factors tend to rate dimensions higher, but the plateau suggests one of three explanations: more knowledgeable respondents both recognise more factors and rate more accurately; awareness of multiple success conditions fosters a more optimistic outlook; or genuinely successful strategies are indeed supported by several contributing factors.

- (8) Challenge awareness and dimension ratings were compared. Respondents who articulated specific challenges in open-ended responses rated dimensions higher than those who did not. Those mentioning community-engagement challenges scored 4.130 versus 3.938 for others (gap = +0.192), and those mentioning bureaucratic challenges scored highest of all at 4.250 versus 3.954 (gap = +0.296). This counter-intuitive result –that respondents most aware of challenges also rate outcomes most positively– suggests that critical awareness does not imply pessimism. Engaged, informed respondents recognise challenges while still perceiving progress, whereas those unaware of any challenges may simply be less engaged with the implementation process. Table 4.13 synthesises the key findings from these cross-comparisons.

Table 4.13. Key cross-comparison findings

1. EFFECTIVENESS ↔ DIMENSION SCORES (difference: 0.626 points)	– those rating strategies as effective score all dimensions 0.6 points higher; – strongest gap in Spatial dimension (0.766 points); – suggests that effectiveness perception is holistic, not dimension-specific.
2. SUCCESS FACTORS ↔ DIMENSION SCORES	– <i>Community trust</i> has largest impact (+0.251 points overall); – <i>Cooperation with authorities</i> is also significant (+0.230 points); – <i>Developed self-government</i> has a surprisingly weak effect (+0.049); – indicates that relational factors matter more than structural ones.
3. ENGAGEMENT LEVEL ↔ RATINGS	– actively engaged rate 0.2 points higher than non-engaged; – <i>Some engagement</i> rate highest (4.11) – optimal middle ground?; – suggests that moderate involvement may provide the best perspective.
4. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT RATING ↔ ACTUAL PARTICIPATION (paradox confirmed)	– actively engaged: 4.04 rating; – not engaged: 3.82 rating; – Academics/NGOs 4.42 (highest, most engaged); – residents: 3.70 (lowest, least engaged); – the gap of 0.72 confirms participation inequality.
5. IMPLEMENTATION PERIOD ↔ EFFECTIVENESS	– longer strategies (5+ years) are more often rated effective (35.5%); – short strategies (< 3 years) are less effective (25.0%); – many uncertainties in long-term strategies; – time allows impact but also creates complexity;
6. IMPLEMENTATION SCALE ↔ DIMENSIONS	– local-city scores are highest (4.18 social, 4.20 spatial); – local-village scores are lowest (3.91 social); – regional excels in <i>Institutional</i> (4.12); – scale matters – cities have resources, while villages struggle.

Table 4.13. *continued*

7. SUCCESS FACTOR COUNT ↔ OUTCOMES	– more factors selected = slightly higher ratings; – diminishing returns after 4–5 factors; – the quality of factors matters more than quantity.
8. CHALLENGES ↔ RATINGS	– those mentioning challenges rate lower (critical awareness); – challenge awareness correlates with more nuanced evaluation; – suggests that the most critical respondents are the most informed.

Source: own elaboration.

4.3. Territorial scale matters – divergent assessments and strategic priorities

The scale of territorial governance is a key factor in the effectiveness of local sustainable development strategies (LDSS). Empirical evidence shows that institutional capacity, stakeholder configurations, implementation methods, and strategic outcomes differ systemically at various territorial levels. The territorial scale significantly influences the formation of strategic options for sustainable development strategies, the set of regional development vectors (Harbiankova et al., 2025), and the results of strategising and implementing plans. The presented data shows that the effectiveness of the development of localities – rural areas – is assessed differently at various levels of government, which have characteristic strengths, limitations, and strategic orientations. These findings add new arguments to the dispute between the supporters of centralisation and those favouring decentralisation, and can become the basis of a balanced consensus on this issue. The empirical results indicate the possibility of focusing on a more nuanced model of territorial development, in which different levels play different roles in an integrated multi-level governance system. The survey data includes responses stratified across five territorial governance levels: Municipalities [Pol. *gminy*] constitute 18.4% of the sample (n=69) and serve as the primary interface between residents and formal government. Voivodeships [Pol. *województwa*] account for 17.3% (n=65) of the respondents and function at the regional coordination level. Districts [Pol. *powiaty*] represent 14.9% (n=56) of responses and occupy an intermediate administrative tier. Major Cities comprise only 2.1% (n=8), reflecting their exceptional status as urban centres. Cities/Towns make up 1.1% (n=4) of the sample. The Other/Unspecified category, at 46.2% (n=173), likely includes respondents whose organisational affiliation does not align with formal administrative categories.

Figure 4.14 displays the sample distribution across these territorial levels. The underrepresentation of major cities and smaller urban centres reflects the study's primary focus on rural sustainable development, where municipalities and districts are the predominant governance structures. The substantial proportion of “other/

unspecified” responses can indicate the increasing prevalence of governance structures that transcend traditional administrative boundaries, such as inter-municipal associations, public-private partnerships, and community-based organisations. This trend reflects the evolving governance architectures in Eastern Europe.

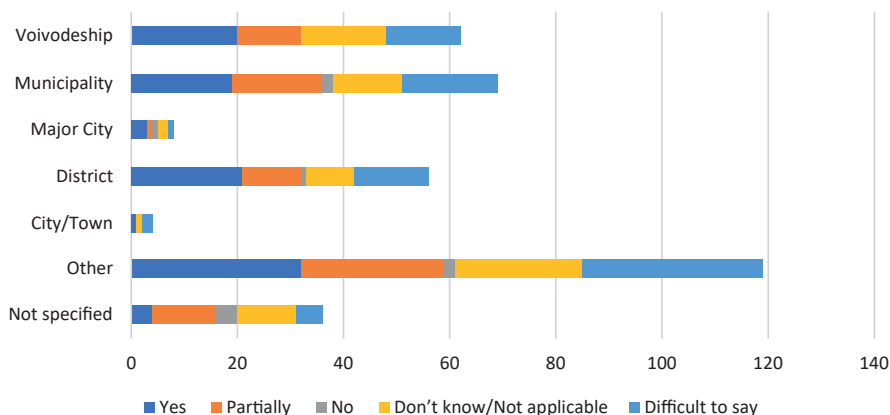


Figure 4.14. Effectiveness by territorial level detailed

Source: own elaboration.

For comparative analysis, this section focuses on the three major governance levels: **municipalities** (i.e., localities), **districts**, and **voivodeships**. Together, these categories constitute 50.6% of the sample and represent the formal administrative hierarchy most relevant to rural development. This stratification enables an examination of how the perceptions of effectiveness, strategic priorities, and emphasis on success factors vary across the nested governance hierarchy.

Overall effectiveness performance across territorial levels

Finding 1. Higher scores for major cities

Figure 4.15 provides territorial strategies effectiveness ratings across five territorial levels, revealing a significant disparity in overall performance. Strategies of the major cities received the highest effectiveness rating at 4.340 out of 5, substantially surpassing all other governance levels. This constitutes an advantage of 0.351 points (8.8%) over the strategies of municipalities, which represent the lowest-performing tier. The hierarchical ranking of overall SDS performance is as follows: major cities – 4.340 (highest), voivodeships – 4.080, districts – 4.016, municipalities – 3.989, city/towns – 3.827 (lowest).

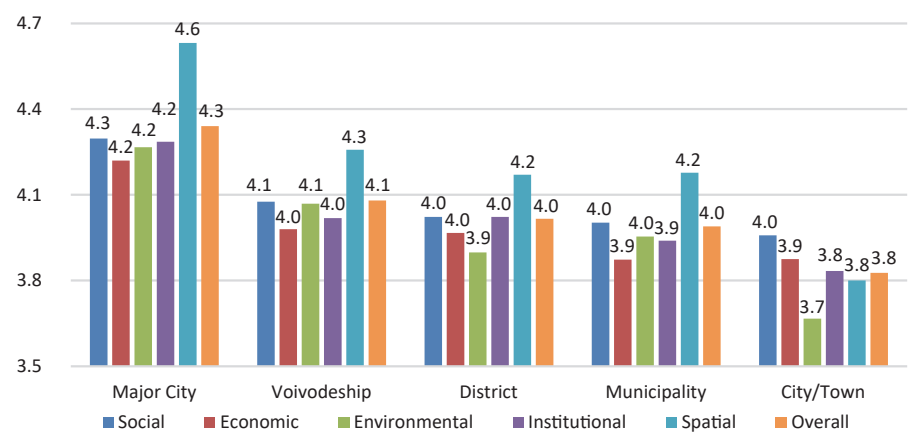


Figure 4.15. A comparison of five sustainability dimension scores across SDS of different territorial governance levels

Source: own elaboration.

The clear leadership in the evaluation of the effectiveness of the development strategies of large cities can be attributed to fundamental structural differences in resource allocation, institutional capacity, and governance infrastructure. Major cities (and, consequently, their development strategies) generally benefit from: 1) concentrated financial resources due to larger tax bases and prioritised access to national and international funding; 2) specialised professional expertise across multiple functional domains; 3) advanced baseline infrastructure that facilitates rapid implementation of developmental initiatives; 4) access to national and international networks that enable knowledge transfer and partnership opportunities; and 5) economies of scale in service delivery, which lower per-capita implementation costs. These structural advantages directly contribute to higher perceived effectiveness across most measured dimensions of the SDSs.

However, this finding should be interpreted with caution. The sample size for major city responses (n=8) is relatively small, which can introduce sampling variability. Additionally, major cities generally operate within contexts of higher baseline infrastructure and institutional development. Therefore, comparisons with rural municipalities can reflect fundamentally different starting conditions rather than differences in the results of their development strategies, governance approach, or community engagement quality.

Figure 4.16 details the effectiveness assessments of local sustainable development strategies of large cities across five dimensions, revealing distinct patterns: spatial dimension – 4.631, which is the highest across all dimensions and governance levels; social dimension – 4.297; institutional dimension – 4.286; environmental dimension – 4.267; economic dimension – 4.220, which is the lowest value, yet still substantially elevated.

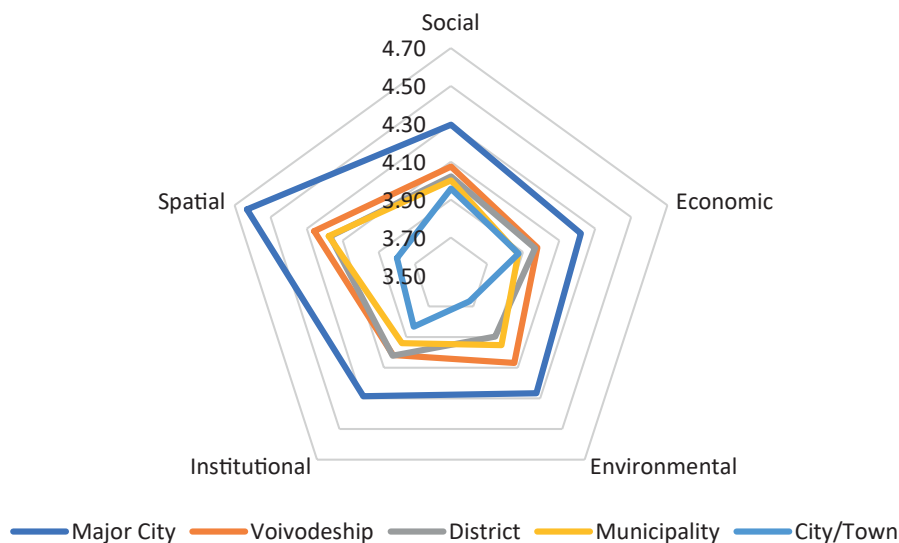


Figure 4.16. Five-dimensional profiles of the effectiveness of sustainable development strategies at different levels of territorial governance

Source: own elaboration.

The outstanding performance of the effectiveness of the SDS of major cities in the spatial dimension (0.37 points above the next highest group) reflects the tangible visibility of urban infrastructure such as roads, public spaces, utilities, and transportation systems that residents encounter daily. This advantage highlights a key principle: concrete, observable improvements in the built environment lead to measurable increases in residents' perceptions of the effectiveness of development. The comparatively smaller differences in the social dimension and the economic dimension indicate that the advantages of the major cities SDS are most pronounced in areas that benefit from capital investment and physical infrastructure.

A comparative analysis of mid-level governance – voivodeships and districts

Finding 2. The voivodeship coordination capacity

Table 4.14 presents the distinctive performance profile of the evaluation of the effectiveness of voivodeships strategies at the regional coordination level, indicating the second-highest overall performance rating of 4.080.

Table 4.14. The characteristic strengths of SDS in voivodeships

Characteristic	Value	Significance
Overall effectiveness rating	4.080	second highest across all levels
The adoption of 5-year implementation horizons	47.7%	highest rate among all governance levels
Emphasis on experience in cooperation	63.1%	highest across all levels
"Not effective" responses	0%	regional strategies broadly acceptable

Source: own elaboration.

The distinctive profile of voivodeship-level strategies highlights the institutional characteristics that underpin effective regional-level coordination mechanisms. Voivodeship-level strategies assessment demonstrate: 1) the ability to adopt extended time horizons of five years or more, which facilitates strategic planning independent of short-term electoral cycles; 2) the accumulation of experiential knowledge in multi-stakeholder coordination, resulting from repeated participation in regional development initiatives; 3) the capacity to maintain balance across multiple policy domains, addressing economic competitiveness, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability without excessive specialisation; and 4) the presence of political consensus-building mechanisms, as evidenced by the near-total absence of "not effective" assessments.

The emphasis on "experience in cooperation" (63.1% of voivodeship respondents) reflects a phenomenon extensively documented in network governance literature. Regional coordination structures, through repeated interactions with multiple municipalities and stakeholder groups, accumulate institutional memory concerning effective coordination mechanisms and partner reliability. This experiential knowledge becomes embedded in governance processes and enhances coordination effectiveness.

Finding 3. Districts as the focus for implementation

Table 4.15 illustrates the unique profile of districts [Pol. *powiaty*], which emerge as the optimal governance scale for policy (including strategising) implementation.

The district-level strategies assessments reveal the 'Goldilocks principle' in governance scale optimisation, as districts achieve a distinctive equilibrium between institutional capacity and proximity to communities, specifically:

1. proximity to communities – districts maintain administrative proximity to understand local needs, constraints, and cultural contexts, while avoiding the challenges posed by heterogeneity;
2. administrative capacity – the focus on "developed self-government" (62.5%) shows that districts can handle complex, multi-municipal projects while staying accountable;
3. implementation pragmatism – the 3–5-year strategic cycle is optimal. This period is longer than electoral cycles (20.3% adopt 3-year horizons) but shorter than regional planning horizons;

Table 4.15. The characteristic of districts

Characteristic	Rating/Percentage	Significance
Overall effectiveness rating	4.016	slightly above municipalities, trailing voivodeships
Highest “effective” rating	37.5%	highest across all governance levels
Emphasis on cooperation with authorities	71.4%	highest among all levels
Emphasis on developed self-government	62.5%	highest institutional maturity indicator
3–5-year implementation cycles	41.1%	highest adoption rate; optimal duration
Most balanced dimension profile	range 0.272	indicates holistic approach to development

Source: own elaboration.

4. sectoral specialisation – districts focus mostly on agriculture (11.9%, the highest among all governance levels), reflecting their rural composition. They also prioritise infrastructure (30.7%) and economic development (15.8%);
5. cooperation infrastructure – the focus on ‘cooperation with authorities’ (71.4%) indicates district significance in multilevel governance networks. Districts’ embeddedness in vertical relationships enables resource mobilisation, with autonomy for local strategies.

Collectively, according to the respondents, these characteristics position districts as the optimal platform for implementing rural sustainable development strategies.

High ratings of the effectiveness of local strategies (37.5%) and the highest indicators of cooperation and institutional maturity demonstrate that the districts combine proximity to residents with sufficient potential and professional knowledge, which municipalities still lack (see Text Box).

The District Advantage: Stakeholder Experience of Optimal Governance Scale

“The district level works because it is close enough to understand what we actually need, yet large enough to have professional expertise and resources.”

— Respondent paraphrase (Poland, resident)

“At the district level, we can coordinate across multiple villages and municipalities, building integrated solutions that respect local differences.”

— Respondent observation (Poland, district-level official)

“The 3–5-year timeframe at the district level is realistic – long enough to see real results, but not so long that we lose focus or face political disruption.”

— Respondent reflection (both countries, implied from timeframe preferences)

“Districts can specialise in what they do well – agricultural support, inter-municipal coordination – rather than trying to be everything to everyone like municipalities.”

— Representative observation (Poland)

Municipality challenges – administrative proximity without corresponding efficiency or higher expectations?

Finding 4. Direct participants in the strategies (at the municipal level) expected more

The administrative proximity of local strategies to the population – as well as the direct participation of the respondents in their development – increases the demands on the effectiveness of strategies (reduces the estimates), as Figure 4.17 and Table 4.16 illustrate. At the local level, more is expected from strategies.

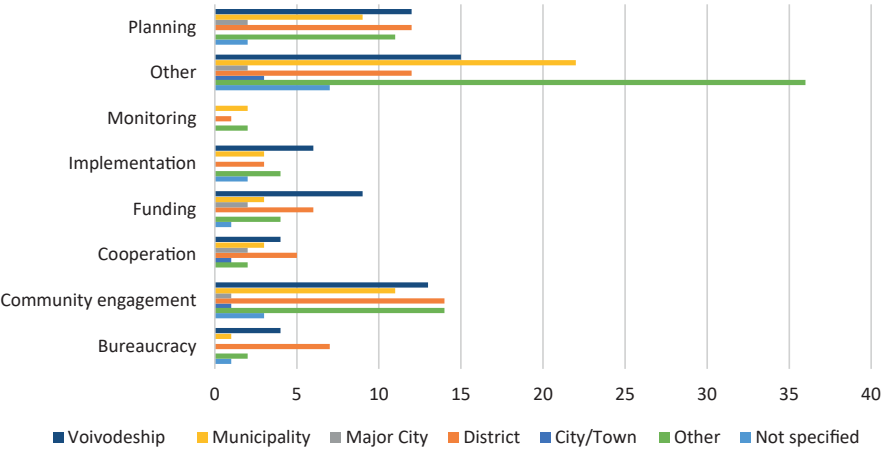


Figure 4.17. Challenges by territorial level
Source: own elaboration.

Table 4.16. The characteristics of municipalities

Metric	Rating/Percentage	Position Among Levels
Overall effectiveness rating	3.989	fourth out of five
Economic dimension rating	3.873	weakest among all dimensions
Positive effectiveness rating	52.2%	lowest among main levels
“Effective” designation	Below average	lowest effectiveness confidence
Experience in cooperation	49.3%	lowest accumulation of cooperation experience
Developed self-government	49.3%	lowest institutional maturity indicators

Source: own elaboration.

This study documents the “municipality paradox” – the phenomenon where local development strategies closest to residents are rated low for their effectiveness. However, this data should not be interpreted as a refutation of the widespread belief that administrative decentralisation leads to improved developmental outcomes. On the contrary, our observations show that the proximity of strategies to

the population – i.e., the direct participation of residents in their development and implementation – creates higher demands on strategies as well as expectations of significant results and greater effectiveness. Therefore, actual assessments turn out to be low. The situation is also affected by some additional constraints:

1. limited institutional capacity – municipalities are the smallest formal administrative units and therefore face limitations in expert, human, and analytical capabilities. Their “local self-governance development” rating of 49.3% indicates dissatisfaction with its level, limited resources, and competencies (which are transferred to “higher” levels of government);
2. resource shortage and insufficient cooperation – the emphasis on “funding constraints” and the lowest rating of “cooperation with authorities” (65.2%) both demonstrate difficulties in the real mobilisation of resources (including for the implementation of strategies) as well as obstacles in defending the interests of localities;
3. strategic diversity – municipalities demonstrate a balanced emphasis on several implementation periods, which indicates that they take into account the specific conditions of local development. Districts prefer 3–5-year cycles, while voivodeships prefer longer periods (i.e., we observe a higher degree of unification, and often formalisation, compared to municipalities);
4. diverse problems – 31.9% of municipalities report “other/general problems”, which indicates that they have a wide range of obstacles and challenges that were not proposed as a possible option in the questionnaire. This contrasts with districts and voivodeships, where the range of such obstacles narrows due to the generalisation of information. At the same time, at the district and voivodeship level, these diverse aspects of development are lost, not taken into account, and as a result, the effectiveness of local strategies can decrease due to this;
5. cooperation reserves – only (or as many as) 49.3% of municipalities have experience working with several stakeholders. This indicates, on the one hand, the prevalence of cooperation, and on the other hand, the presence of significant additional reserves. It should also be taken into account that cooperation at the municipal level is more often (compared to the district or voivodeship levels) filled with practical actions and results, and is much less formal.

The municipality paradox demonstrates that administrative proximity is necessary, but not sufficient, for effective development. Although proximity increases democratic legitimacy and the potential for responsive governance, it must be complemented by the development of institutional capacity, access to resources, and collaborative experience. Through these paths, it is possible to build effective multi-level governance systems with an appropriate strategy model, where different administrative levels play complementary roles for effective development. Residents’ and officials’ observations illustrate the municipality paradox. Due to the fact that municipalities are institutionally closest to the local population, and in assessing the effectiveness of local strategies at this level, more direct participants in the development and implementation of strategies are involved, they often receive the lowest effectiveness ratings (3.989) and positive ratings (52.2%). We have

already explained this paradox by higher expectations from strategies and dissatisfaction with partial results. During the evaluation of municipal strategies, purely statistical methods are supplemented by moments related to direct knowledge of the situation, even indignation or protest. Thus, at the municipal level, the process of strategising and its evaluation is much more lively and diverse compared to the district and voivodeship levels. (see Text Box).

Proximity Without Capacity: Why Close Municipalities Struggle

"The municipality is closest to us, but it often lacks the capacity, the expertise, and the resources to implement ambitious strategies effectively."

— Respondent paraphrase (Poland, resident)

"Municipal strategies often seem generic – addressing all needs equally – rather than prioritising what the municipality can do best given its limited resources."

— Respondent observation (Poland, local authority)

"Decision-making at the municipal level is sometimes unclear, and residents do not understand the reasoning behind priorities. Transparency is lacking."

— Representative resident concern (both countries)

"Short-term strategic cycles due to budget constraints and election cycles mean municipalities cannot commit to long-term transformation."

— Respondent reflection (Poland, government official)

Sector specialisation across governance levels

Finding 5. Differentiated sectoral emphasis by territorial scale

Figure 4.18 illustrates distinct patterns of sectoral specialisation across governance levels, demonstrating that each scale tends to focus on specific developmental domains.

Sectoral specialisation patterns indicate complementary functional roles across governance levels.

1. major cities – the disproportionate emphasis on infrastructure (38.5%) reflects urban development priorities such as public transportation, water systems, and waste management. These domains require capital-intensive and coordinated approaches that are most effectively managed at the metropolitan scale;
2. voivodeships – the distinctive emphasis on social policy coordination (17.9%, tied with economic) demonstrates the focus of regional governance on addressing the issue of social equity and human development across diverse municipalities with varying resources;
3. districts – the highest emphasis on agriculture (11.9%) reflects the predominantly rural composition of district territories and the presence of district-level agricultural extension services, which is an institutional capability;
4. municipalities – the most balanced sectoral distribution reflects the necessity for municipalities to address multiple domains that are simultaneously important for the resilient development of the territory. A strategic approach here is also

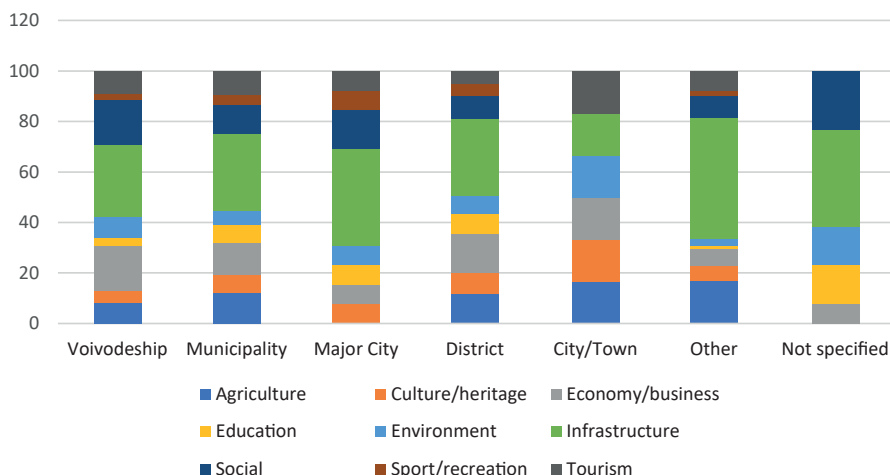


Figure 4.18. The distribution of development sectors addressed at different territorial governance levels

Source: own elaboration.

important to preserve and support these diverse vectors of local development, the systemic integration of which creates the conditions for the resilience of the locality and the local community.

These specialisation patterns suggest that functional complementarity arises when the principle of subsidiarity in territorial development is complemented by an approach in which levels of government focus on sectoral areas that correspond to their structural advantages. When voivodeship or districts try to take over the development of all areas, their efficiency decreases.

The differentiation of success factors across governance levels

Finding 6. Territorial scale influences emphasis on success factors

Figure 4.19 presents the marked variation in how different governance levels emphasise success factors, revealing that “appropriate success factors” vary systemically by scale.

The success factor differentiation reveals that various governance scales require different support mechanisms and preconditions for effective implementation:

1. cooperation with authorities (vertical integration) – the more emphasis on vertical integration, the lower governance scale, with lower-level structures needing stronger cooperation. Districts (71.4%) place more emphasis than voivodeships (56.9%), as mobilising resources and political support from higher levels depends on effectiveness. Less emphasis on cooperation is required by regional voivodeships;

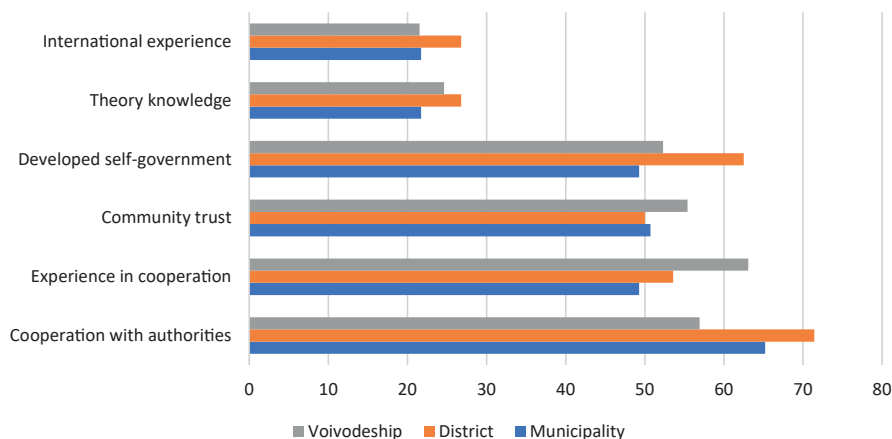


Figure 4.19. Success factors by territorial level

Source: own elaboration.

2. developed self-governance (institutional maturity) – districts show the highest emphasis (62.5%) on self-governance developed institutionally. This suggests that implementation requires adequate institutional maturity to manage complex initiatives, while avoiding the bureaucratic inertia often associated with the largest organisations;
3. experience in cooperation (accumulated capital) – voivodeships (63.1%) emphasise experience gained from repeated engagement. Municipalities (49.3%) rate lower, showing need for support to build capacity for more advanced co-operation;
4. community trust (social capital) – the findings indicate that community trust is a universal precondition for development effectiveness, as evidenced by the consistent emphasis observed across governance scales (50–59%). While the importance of trust remains constant, the mechanisms required to cultivate it vary by governance level.

Implementation time horizons as scale differentiation

Finding 7. Strategic time horizons vary systemically by governance level

Figure 4.20 and Table 4.17 illustrate a pronounced correlation between strategic time horizons and the scale of governance.

The observed pattern in time horizons highlights underlying structural constraints and capacities associated with each governance scale:

1. regional advantage (voivodeships) – voivodeships adopt 5+ year horizons (47.7%), reflecting institutional stability and predictability at the regional level. This allows for multi-year planning due to longer regional political cycles, access to funding sources, and continuity from staff;

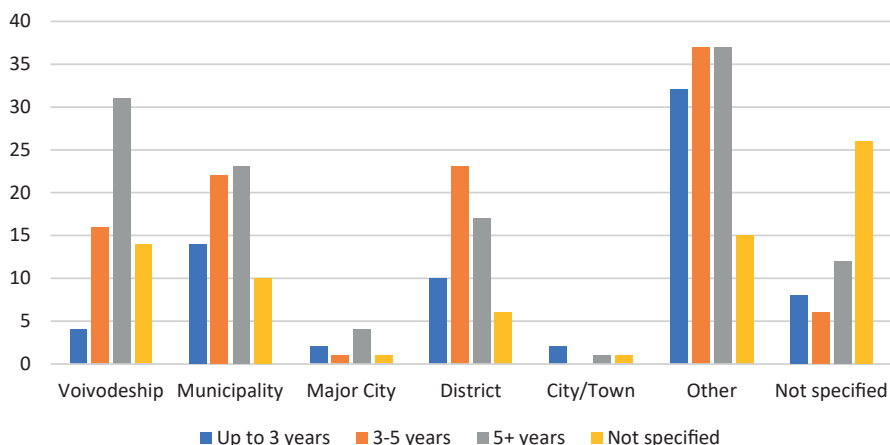


Figure 4.20. Sample distribution by territorial scale

Source: own elaboration.

Table 4.17. Strategic time horizons and the scale of governance

Time horizon	Voivodeship (%)	District (%)	Municipality (%)	Pattern
Long-term (5+ years)	47.7	30.4	33.3	higher scales adopt longer horizons
Medium-term (3-5 years)	24.6	41.1	31.9	district optimum
Short-term (up to 3 years)	6.2	17.9	20.3	lower scales adopt shorter cycles

Source: own elaboration.

2. optimising districts at mid-term – 41.1% of districts focus mainly on 3–5-year cycles. This is a good timeframe for governance, as it allows the completion of complex initiatives, ensures accountability to communities, facilitates adaptive management, and allows for results to be demonstrated while leadership is in place;
3. municipality constraint to short-term cycles – the focus on short-term planning at the municipal level (20.3%) is often due to electoral pressures. Municipal leaders, operating under four-year mandates, are incentivised to prioritise visible, single-term projects over multi-year initiatives. The development of local self-governance with the active participation of NGOs, local development funds, and LEADER/CLLD instruments could improve this situation, increasing the time horizon of strategising. This finding is further supported by a robust positive correlation between extended strategic time horizons and elevated effectiveness ratings:
 - 5+ year strategies: 35.5% rated highly effective;

- 3-5-year strategies: 33.7% rated highly effective;
- up to 3 years: 25.0% rated highly effective.

The 10.5-point difference between the longest and shortest time horizons indicates that temporal stability is a significant predictor of strategic effectiveness. Consequently, policies that promote longer planning cycles at the municipal level – such as multi-year budget frameworks, extended electoral cycles, and guaranteed resource commitments – have the potential to substantially improve rural development outcomes.

The universality of the spatial dimension

Finding 8. Infrastructure quality surpasses governance scale effects

Table 4.18 presents a key finding – the spatial dimension consistently receives high ratings across all governance levels, indicating a strong consensus.

Table 4.18. Spatial dimension scores across governance levels

Governance level	Spatial dimension score	Difference from overall average
Voivodeships	4.258	+0.178
Districts	4.170	+0.154
Municipalities	4.177	+0.188

Source: own elaboration.

Figure 3.29 illustrates this pattern, with the spatial dimension as the only one achieving score above 4.2 across all governance levels. The average spatial score (4.207) surpasses the combined average of all other dimensions (3.967) by 0.240 points, representing a substantial and consistent difference. The universality of the spatial dimension indicates a valuable entry-point strategy for rural development. Infrastructure improvements, due to their consensus-building and visible outcomes, can act as catalytic projects that foster social capital and governance legitimacy, which are essential for addressing more complex social, economic, and institutional challenges. This finding highlights key dynamics in stakeholder perception and the formation of social consensus:

1. tangible visibility – infrastructure such as roads, water systems, public spaces and utilities is clearly visible to residents. This means that they can assess them without specialist knowledge or abstract frameworks. Unlike institutional capacity or social cohesion, infrastructure quality can be verified by sensory observation;
2. universal valuation – infrastructure benefits all groups, regardless of demographic characteristics. Unlike some policies, infrastructure improvements typically receive approval;
3. political safety – investments in infrastructure are usually seen as low risk politically. Unlike social or environmental policies that might benefit certain groups, spending on infrastructure tends to be more universally agreed upon;

4. measuring and communicating infrastructural improvements – it is easy to quantify progress, e.g., roads, water systems, buildings. This makes it easy to communicate with stakeholders and demonstrate progress;
5. demonstration effects – infrastructural improvements demonstrate government effectiveness, enhancing citizen confidence and encouraging participation in future development. This trust-building extends beyond projects.

A comparative analysis of strategic priorities and reform orientations

This section examines whether different strategic orientations, characterised by varying emphases on specific success factors and reform directions, are associated with distinct effectiveness outcomes. The analysis seeks to determine which combinations of priorities produce superior results across governance levels.

Finding 1. Structural v. relational divides

The analysis evaluated whether prioritising structural factors, such as institutional self-government development, or relational factors, such as theory and knowledge dissemination, correlates with differences in perceived effectiveness (Table 4.19).

Table 4.19. Structural v. relational factors correlation by differences in perceived effectiveness

Priority emphasis	Sample (n)	Overall score	Difference
Emphasis on self-government	169	3.970	+0.061 not significant ($p > 0.50$)
Emphasis on theory/knowledge	97	4.031	

Source: own elaboration.

This counterintuitive finding, in which structural versus relational emphasis shows negligible differentiation, suggests that both institutional development and knowledge dissemination contribute equally to effectiveness when present. Three interpretations warrant consideration:

1. Sufficiency and necessity are both necessary for success. Knowledge and governance without embedding is wasted, and without embedded knowledge – rigid.
2. Alternatively, the factors can be partly substitutable. Institutions can function adequately with limited knowledge if relationships are strong, while knowledge can guide action when formal institutions are underdeveloped.
3. The respondents who emphasise either factor may be more engaged stakeholders. The lack of differentiation can reflect common engagement rather than the equivalence of mechanisms.

Finding 2. Synergy effect – multi-level governance's empirical signature

The most significant finding concerns the interaction effect between horizontal social capital (community trust) and vertical governance capacity (cooperation with authorities), as presented in Table 4.20.

Table 4.20. Data for an analysis of a synergy effect

Factor combination	Sample (n)	Score	Relative to expectation
Trust only	56	3.916	-
Cooperation only	101	3.894	-
Both factors	123	4.132	Synergy: +0.227
Neither factor	95	3.688	-

Source: own elaboration.

Based on data from Table 3.27, the synergy was calculated. Average of single factors: $(3.916 + 3.894) / 2 = 3.905$. Actual combined score: 4.13; Synergy bonus: $4.132 - 3.905 = +0.227$ points (5.8% improvement).

The statistical significance of these results has been determined. The synergy effect (0.227 points) substantially exceeds the individual effect sizes:

- both v. trust only: 0.216 points difference;
- both v. cooperation only: 0.238 points difference;
- both v. neither: 0.444 points difference (12.0% gap).

This finding offers empirical support for multi-level governance theory, which posits that development effectiveness emerges through the articulation of multiple governance levels, each contributing distinct functions:

1. horizontal social capital (community trust) – community trust is key to collective action, information flow, and consensus on developmental priorities. Without trust, there is disengagement and resistance;
2. vertical governance integration (authority cooperation) – cooperation with authorities at the institutional level enables the mobilisation of resources, the alignment of policies, and the formalisation of commitments needed for continued implementation.
3. the synergy mechanism – the synergy effect, measured as 0.227 points, indicates that these two dimensions interact multiplicatively rather than additively. The following specific points demonstrate this: (i) community trust alone (3.916) proves insufficient without institutional capacity to implement resident preferences; (ii) institutional capacity alone (3.894) proves insufficient without community support and legitimacy; (iii) the combination enhances effectiveness through complementary mechanisms. Trust provides legitimacy for institutional action, while institutional capacity provides credibility for trust relationships.

This pattern aligns with the social capital theory, which distinguishes between bonding capital (horizontal community trust) and bridging capital (vertical

institutional connections). The empirical findings indicate that both are essential for development outcomes.

Finding 3. The strategic complexity valley

Those respondents who report the awareness of multiple strategic challenges rate lower on specific dimensions than those with minimal challenge awareness, who report higher overall satisfaction (Table 4.21).

Table 4.21. Challenge awareness across specific dimensions

Challenge awareness level	Environmental dimension	Social dimension	Overall satisfaction
No challenges identified	4.15	3.92	3.88
1–2 challenges identified	3.95	3.68	3.95
3+ challenges identified	3.85	3.62	4.07

Source: own elaboration.

The identified phenomenon is referred to as the “awareness valley”. This non-linear pattern unveils a critical phenomenon in strategy implementation, referred to as the “strategic complexity valley”:

1. the initial optimism phase – those respondents who reported minimal challenge awareness exhibited the highest dimension-specific ratings (3.92–4.15), as their awareness was constrained to successes and visible achievements;
2. the complexity integration phase – as stakeholders engage more deeply with strategy implementation, their awareness of challenges and constraints increases. This phenomenon results in the manifestation of lower dimension-specific ratings as critical perspectives evolve;
3. the informed engagement phase – conversely, those respondents who reported the greatest challenges exhibited the highest levels of overall satisfaction (4.07). This finding indicates that an informed critical perspective, while acknowledging real constraints, also recognises complexity and interdependencies that justify overall satisfaction despite specific limitations.

All this indicates that increases in challenge reporting should not be interpreted as the indicators of dissatisfaction or strategy failure. Conversely, an escalation in the level of challenge awareness frequently signifies an augmentation in engagement and a refinement in understanding. Those responsible for the implementation of strategies should be aware of a tendency for the “getting worse before better” pattern, as stakeholders transition from optimistic initial perspectives to informed critical assessments and then to comprehensive understandings.

The findings demonstrate that rural sustainable development depends on scale-appropriate governance rather than on uniform policy design. Municipal and district levels jointly form the core of effective territorial development: municipalities ensure responsiveness to local needs, while districts provide coordination capacity,

resource integration, and cross-municipal implementation. Strengthening district institutions and supporting municipalities through simplified strategic frameworks, technical assistance, and cooperation mechanisms is, therefore, critical. Infrastructural development should be understood not as an end in itself but as a strategic entry point, whose effectiveness depends on its integration with community capacity development, local participation, and institutional learning. Governance effectiveness is further enhanced through the alignment of strategic time horizons across levels and through formal multi-level coordination, funding, and information-exchange mechanisms.

5. Local v. all? Several surprises from the study

5.1. Attention to diversity and social capital

The perspectives of local administration representatives and local residents on the issue of the priority factors for the success of local strategies are even more divergent.

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 5.1, the government received 60% positive/partial ratings, while residents exhibited 50% uncertainty, suggesting exclusion. The perspectives do not align in any direction, and at the primary points, the viewpoints are diametrically opposed. The most significant prerequisites for the success of strategies employed by local administrations include external financing, project support, and cooperation with the local administration. In contrast, local residents ascribed significantly lower levels of importance to these factors. Their primary concerns pertained to the trust amongst community members and the active participation of local residents in leadership roles. The evaluation of these points was conducted by representatives of administrations, with the lowest scores being attributed to trust, which is a factor that was scarcely mentioned by the participants. It appears that the two parties concerned inhabit distinct intellectual universes.

A significant disparity was also observed in the percentage of those respondents who considered local strategies effective, with the proportion being twice as high in one group as in the other. Success factors demonstrate divergent patterns of emphasis. Local Government entities prioritise allocating resources (e.g., external funding, 40%), while residents emphasise social elements (e.g., trust, 45%), depicted in Figure 5.2.

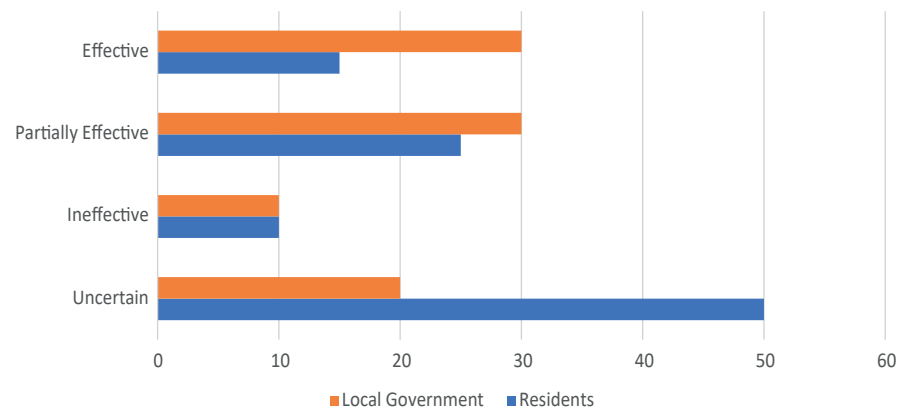


Figure 5.1. The perceived effectiveness of LDS actions by Local Governments and Residents (%)
Source: own elaboration.

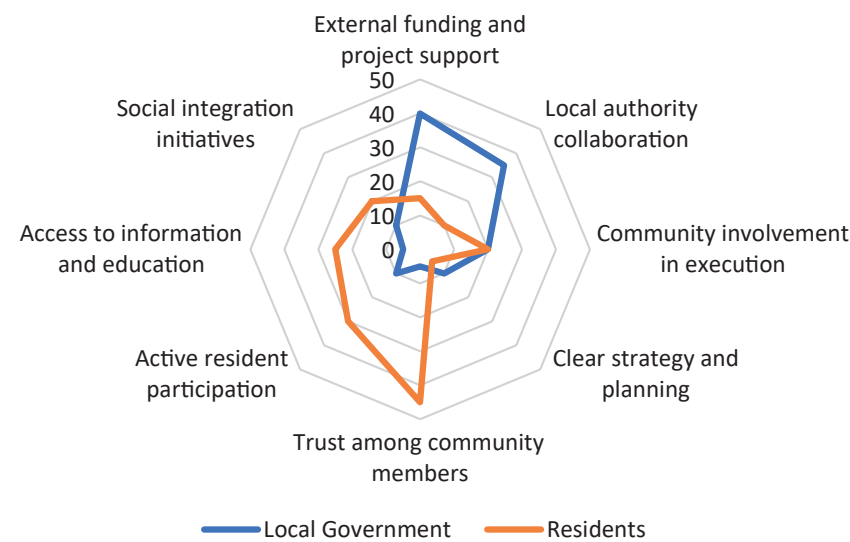


Figure 5.2. Prioritised success factors by Local Governments and Residents (%)
Source: own elaboration.

As illustrated in Table 5.1, 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.

The threefold discrepancy in perceived participation barriers (residents: 35%; local government: 10%) warrants careful interpretation, as Table 5.2 illustrates. This gap likely reflects multiple mechanisms operating simultaneously: 1) *Informational Asymmetry*: local government officials, embedded in strategy-development processes, can normalise procedures that residents experience as opaque; 2) *Role-Based Perception*: officials report on participation mechanisms (meetings, consultation processes), while residents report on the participation impact (whether their input influenced decisions); and 3) *Temporal Mismatch*: residents can reference historic exclusion from strategy development, while officials reference current participation opportunities. Disentangling these mechanisms requires examining whether: residents participate but feel unheard; residents lack information about participation opportunities; or participation occurs but follows a top-down agenda that residents did not co-determine.

The scale of the initiative influences perceptions, with regional efforts eliciting optimism from the Local Government (rated 4.5 on a 5-point scale) but also fostering scepticism among residents (rated 3.8. on a 5-point scale), primarily due to a perceived disconnection.

Table 5.1. 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

Source: own elaboration.

Table 5.2. Procedural barriers by group (% mentions)

Barrier	Local Governments	Residents
Limited participation	10	35
Poor information flow	5	25
The exclusion of local voices	5	20
Bureaucracy and complexity	25	10
Funding constraints	15	5

Source: own elaboration.

The salience of bureaucratic complexity for local government officials is indicative of their direct engagement with EU funding mechanisms, national regulatory frameworks, and municipal approval processes. By contrast, residents encounter

bureaucracy indirectly, e.g., through project delays or inflexibility, rather than through direct administrative engagement. The lower frequency of ‘bureaucracy’ mentioned by residents (10%) does not necessarily indicate that bureaucratic constraints are less problematic for community outcomes; rather, it reflects the fact that residents attribute implementation failures to a lack of political will, insufficient funding, or disengagement, rather than to procedural complexity. This perception gap has important implications: if residents do not perceive bureaucracy as a key barrier, they may not support efforts to deregulate or simplify processes, despite the fact that local government actors view these as essential to improving strategy effectiveness. Addressing this discrepancy necessitates the dissemination of information to residents regarding the manner in which specific bureaucratic constraints translate into delayed or omitted community benefits.

The substantial divergence in effectiveness ratings for social and community integration initiatives (a 25-point gap) and health initiatives (a 20-point gap) reveals a fundamental mismatch between how the local government defines success and how residents experience it. While local government officials prioritise outcomes that are easy to measure and report, such as infrastructure investments and employment creation, residents prioritise improvements in their lived experience, such as social bonds, trust, and health access, which are slower to manifest and harder to quantify. This discrepancy is not merely a measurement artefact; it reflects a deeper tension in the conceptualisation of rural development itself. Local governments, which are accountable to regional and national authorities for quantifiable results, tend to focus on infrastructure and economic metrics. By contrast, residents evaluate strategies based on whether their daily lives have materially improved. This finding challenges the implicit assumption that stakeholders share a common definition of ‘effectiveness’, suggesting that strategy design and assessment frameworks must explicitly address these definitional differences rather than assuming convergence.

Table 5.3. Differences in Prioritised Success Factors for LDS

Local Governments' priorities	Residents' priorities
External funding and project support (40%): critical for enabling tangible projects such as 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%): strengthened 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 prioritised (e.g., funding ~15%)

Source: own elaboration.

Top priorities in mentions demonstrate a clear discrepancy. Local governments view success through a top-down lens, aligning with operational control, while residents prioritise bottom-up elements, indicating gaps in engagement. An 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 (e.g., via educational programmes) to align priorities and enhance outcomes.

The divergences identified in the survey affirm the hypothesis that the community-led approach, bolstered by institutional support, produces more legitimate and adaptive outcomes than top-down models. The residents' prioritisation 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 show 1) the critical importance of social capital, particularly trust and collaborative experience, in determining implementation success, as well as 2) the necessity for differentiated assessment tools tailored to specific stakeholder needs.

Respondents' perspectives indicate that social capital is not solely an abstract theoretical construct but also a tangible phenomenon. Stakeholders identify social capital as networks of trust, histories of successful cooperation, and demonstrated institutional reliability. These elements serve as concrete factors that can either facilitate or impede collective action for sustainability (see Text Box).

Social Capital in Action: How Communities Build and Use Trust Networks

"When local groups work together – neighbours helping neighbours, associations organising community activities –that is when real development happens."

— Respondent synthesis (both countries)

"Successful strategies are built on existing relationships and networks of people who already know and trust each other."

— Respondent reflection (Poland, local authority)

"Social trust means that when someone from the community says 'this will help us,' people believe it because they have worked together before."

— Representative resident observation (both countries)

"The community feels strong when people participate in decisions and feel heard, and when institutions follow through on what they promise."

— Respondent 156 (Poland)

5.2. The participation paradox and other findings challenging conventional knowledge

The analysis revealed several unexpected patterns that fundamentally challenge the existing understandings of the effectiveness of local sustainable development. These findings emphasise the need for a strategic revision of the existing approaches.

The participation paradox

Our first discovery is what we have termed the ‘participation paradox’. We found a discrepancy between how engaged the community is perceived to be by professionals versus how community members perceive their own engagement. Professionals and active participants in these strategies – such as strategy authors, NGO experts, and academics – were convinced that community participation was at a high level. This group gave an average community engagement rating of about 4.4–4.6 out of 5, which is very high. Meanwhile, residents rated this aspect at around 3.7–3.9. In short, what looks like exemplary participation to an expert (with meetings, workshops, and consultations being held) does not feel as effective to the average resident. Local leaders may feel that residents have had opportunities to participate, since a certain group of active individuals attended and voiced their opinions. However, many residents may not have been aware of these activities or may not have seen any tangible outcomes. This paradox means that the mere existence of formal participation mechanisms does not guarantee that the community feels truly included. This is a critical point for bottom-up development: if people do not feel that their voice matters, a strategy loses value. The participation paradox suggests that we need to reach beyond the ‘usual attendees’ and find ways to engage a broader base of residents (Figure 5.3). The participation paradox demonstrates that participation is not a procedural attribute but a relational outcome, dependent on perceived influence rather than formal inclusion.

The comparison of stakeholders’ perspectives clarifies why professionals (Academics/NGOs rate community engagement at 4.42, whereas residents rate it at 3.70, which results in a 0.72-point gap. Professionals tend to assess the presence of participatory processes, while residents focus on the tangible outcomes generated by these processes. This distinction is crucial for understanding the participation paradox (see Text Box).

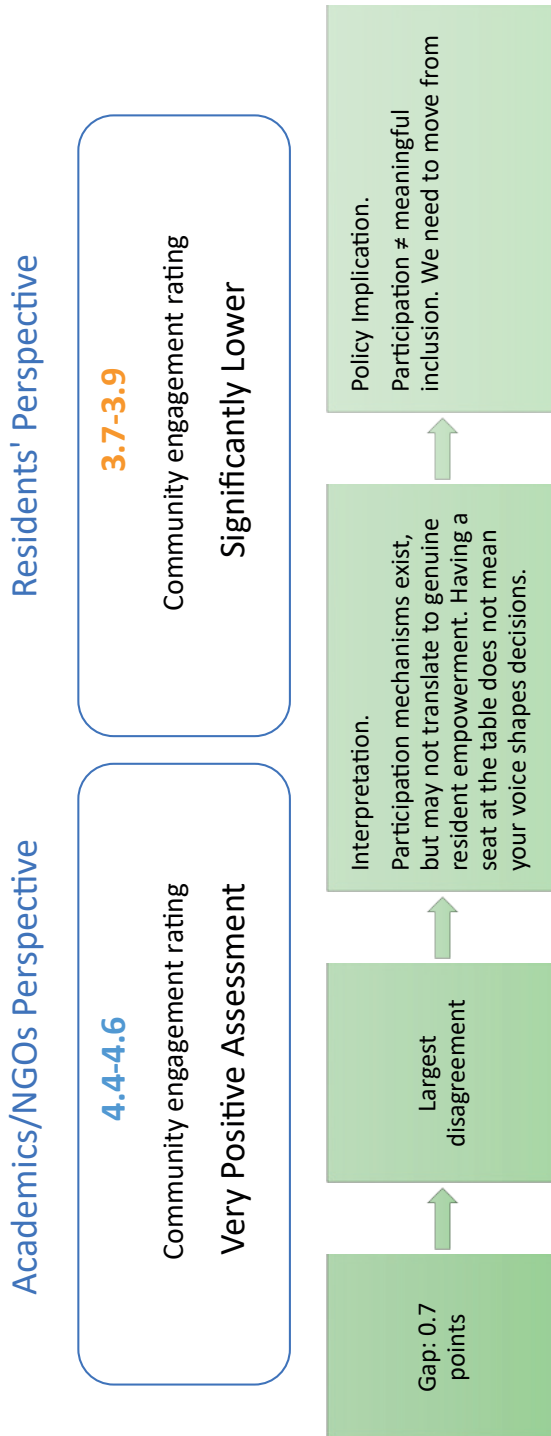


Figure 5.3. The participation paradox
Source: own elaboration.

Professional Promise v. Resident Reality: The Participation Paradox in Practice

[Professional perspective]: “Our strategies include multiple participatory mechanisms – forums, consultations, working groups – ensuring resident voices inform decisions.”

— Respondent synthesis (Poland, NGO/academic)

[Resident perspective]: “We are invited to participate, but the outcomes are predetermined. Our suggestions are acknowledged but not implemented. The process exists for legitimacy, not for influence.”

— Respondent paraphrase (Poland, resident voice)

[Professional reflection]: “We measure participation by attendance, number of consultations, and documented feedback. But we are not measuring whether residents actually influence decisions.”

— Respondent observation (Poland, official)

[Resident expectation]: “Real participation means being consulted when the problem is being defined and when solutions are being designed, not just when the decision is nearly made.”

— Respondent 287 (Poland)

Critical engagement ≠ negativity

The second insight is both interesting and somewhat counterintuitive. It is the common assumption that individuals who voice criticism or draw attention to issues are inherently negative and will consequently provide a negative evaluation. However, the findings of this study demonstrated that critical thinking and analytical skills are not necessarily indicative of a negative attitude. Indeed, those respondents who provided detailed answers to the open-ended questions and offered thoughtful critiques actually rated the strategies' effectiveness higher on average than those who ignored the open questions or only provided brief answers. The methodology employed in order to measure this phenomenon is explained herewith. The respondents were separated into two groups: those who wrote long answers (>150 characters) and those who wrote none answers, or very short ones, to the open questions. The former group, hereafter referred to as the 'actively engaged respondents', assigned an average overall effectiveness score of approximately 4.8/5, while the latter group allocated a mean score of around 3.9/5. This is a substantial difference. Those who contributed the most criticism tended to demonstrate a greater appreciation for the positive aspects, as evidenced by their tendency to assign higher scores. This tendency was met with surprise by some observers. This finding suggests that the individuals in question have a profound commitment to the strategy and are invested in its success. Their ability to identify problems stems from their inherent concern for the subject matter, and their capacity to discern effective methodologies is indicative of their discerning acumen. Those who contributed a minimal amount may have exhibited a greater degree of indifference. The lesson to be drawn from this is that critical voices from the community can be positive and constructive rather than merely negative (Figure 5.4).

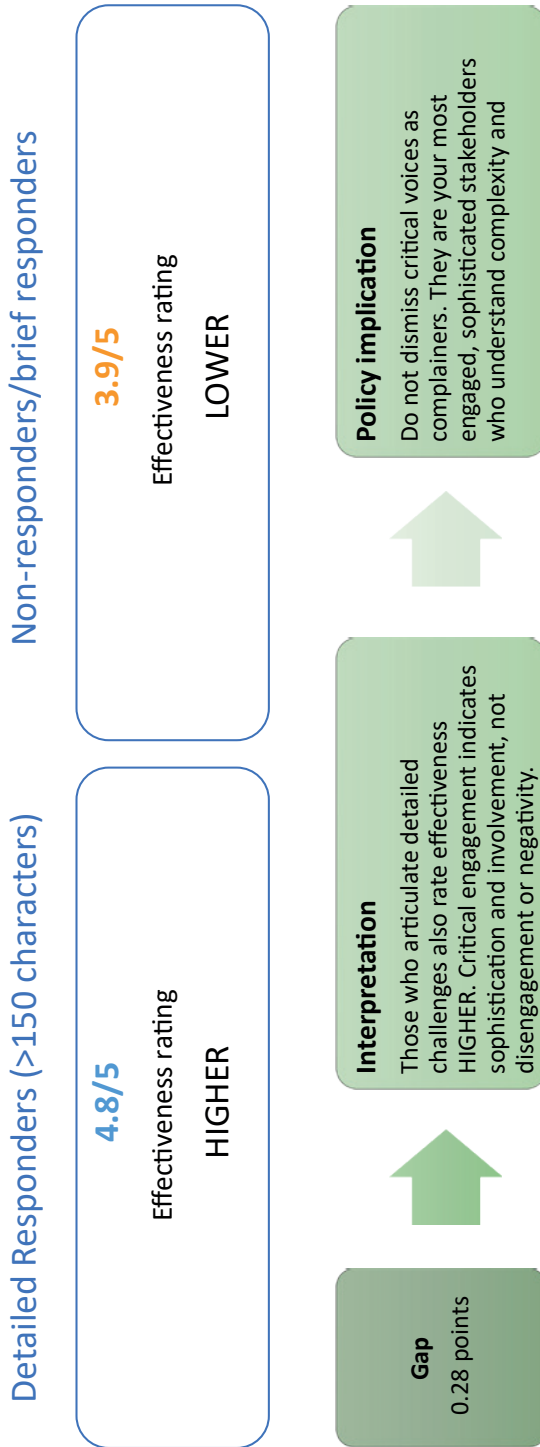


Figure 5.4. Critical engagement ≠ Negativity
Source: own elaboration.

Role-based perception patterns

The third key finding is that perception patterns differ depending on the role of the stakeholder. This finding suggests that each stakeholder group interprets the strategy from the perspective of their own daily responsibilities and concerns. Specifically, three distinct perceptions were identified:

- 1) The focus of academics and NGO experts is on processes and mechanisms. The following questions are posed: Have the conditions for bottom-up development been met? Are the proper governance frameworks in place? Their perspective is systemic in nature, encompassing a thorough evaluation of the prevailing system's functionality and its capacity for enhancement.
- 2) Local government officials concentrate on system constraints and resources. The fundamental question that is being posed is whether the objectives that have been set can be achieved within the constraints imposed by the budget and regulatory framework. The primary question to be addressed is whether the necessary funds and capacity are available for the implementation of these plans. The primary concerns expressed by these stakeholders pertain to the identification of implementation barriers and the challenge of achieving results within the confines of the existing regulatory framework.
- 3) The residents' focus is oriented towards their lived experience and tangible outcomes. The fundamental question guiding this inquiry is whether the daily lives of these individuals have undergone a positive transformation as a result of this strategy. Is improved access to services available? Has a greater sense of protection been engendered? Have novel opportunities emerged for me or my community? The demand for immediate, observable outcomes is evident: if a road has been constructed, individuals seek the opportunity to utilise it; if financial resources have been allocated, there is a desire to ascertain whether these funds have been disseminated to the community (Figure 5.5).



Figure 5.5. Role-based perception patterns
Source: own elaboration.

5.3. Clear concern and interest in improving rural development

What is the way in which stakeholders think about rural development? In general, the respondents’ answers to open-ended questions demonstrate a clear concern and interest in improving rural development (Table 5.4). The distinction between proposals and opinions lies in the level of specificity: proposals extend across a broad theoretical spectrum, whereas opinions are highly particularised, often focusing on the specifics of a given village or locality.

Furthermore, a sense of disappointment and mutual criticism has been expressed. However, the prevailing sentiment is one of a desire for change for the better, with specific proposals being put forward and the need to develop strategies being identified in instances where such strategies have not yet been formulated. The statements selected for the analysis can be regarded as representative, since many other participants in the selected groups expressed themselves in a similar manner.

In other cases, when analysing a socioeconomic phenomenon, one might recall the words “doctors will not help a patient who does not want to be cured.” During the course of the research, no such feeling was experienced. The evident interest suggests the potential for favourable outcomes.

Table 5.4. Compelling quotes (selected)

Academics/NGOs	“Challenges? Undoubtedly the growing paperwork and bureaucracy in local action. What change would improve future strategies? Employing local leaders (financing their work) and funds for bottom-up initiatives as it was at the beginning.”
Local Governments	“The biggest challenge is the gap between sectors/areas. Environmental, transport, housing, or social actions are often implemented independently, without a common vision.”
Residents	“We need to think about the village as a social space, not just a production space. The village is a place of residence, life, care, community. Rural residents want dignified conditions, access to services, communication, development opportunities. This is not a demand, but a basic need.”

Source: own elaboration.

The hypothesis demands more than mere consideration of residents; it seeks *actual grounding* in their lived experience and conceptions. This is repeatedly found in open questions and contextually across the survey responses.

Reasoning the discrepancies in the respondents’ perceptions

The question that arises from this observation is why such discrepancies in perception occur. A thorough examination of the subject has resulted in the identification of three interpretations, as Figure 5.6 indicates.

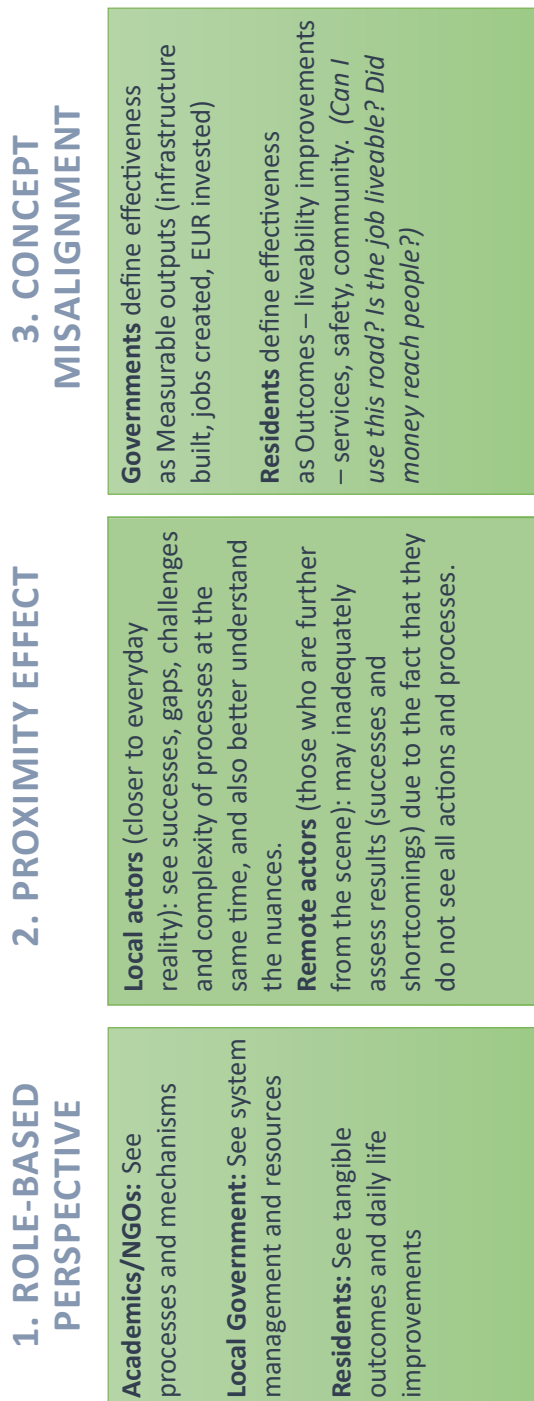


Figure 5.6. The reasons for stakeholders' divergent perceptions of effectiveness
Source: own elaboration.

Firstly, the role-based lenses concept posits that each group perceives the concept of effectiveness from the perspective of their function. Secondly, proximity effects are evident, with those closest to daily implementation reporting both progress and gaps. The third challenge pertains to concept misalignment, wherein governmental entities predominantly measure outputs while the population focuses on their perceived liveability. This phenomenon extends beyond mere perceptual discrepancies; it encompasses fundamental differences in the conceptualisation of 'effectiveness'.

What the findings reveal about resident-centred assessment methodology

(a) *The "Participation Paradox" as Methodological Evidence.* The finding that residents perceive lower participation despite institutional participation mechanisms suggests that participatory structures do not guarantee participatory outcomes. This validates our methodological choice to assess resident perspectives separately rather than evaluating whether stakeholder engagement equals resident empowerment. The methodology successfully identified a gap that conventional indicators might miss.

(b) *Differential Effectiveness Perceptions.* The variation in how different stakeholder groups rate effectiveness (NGOs – highest; residents – most cautious) reveals that effectiveness itself is not a neutral, objective category. Our five-dimensional framework attempted to encompass multiple perspectives on effectiveness. The findings suggest that this framework has partially succeeded (a high degree of agreement on environmental dimension, but a low degree of agreement on social dimension), but may require refinement to better capture residents' holistic assessment.

(c) *The Primacy of Tangible Outcomes.* Spatial improvements received the highest ratings across all groups (4.13), suggesting that residents prioritise visible, material improvements over policy-level changes. This finding supports our argument that assessment frameworks must remain grounded in residents' lived experiences rather than in abstract sustainability indicators.

Conclusion

From the governance scale paradox to integrated multi-level systems

The empirical analysis of governance scale effects demonstrates that rural sustainable development effectiveness is maximised not by the dominance of a single governance level, but by integrating complementary capabilities across multiple scales. This insight reframes the governance debate from the binary choice between decentralisation and centralisation to a systems-design challenge: how to integrate different scales, each with unique capacities and constraints, into coherent multi-level governance architectures.

The municipality paradox, in which proximity does not guarantee effectiveness, illustrates that administrative decentralisation without sufficient institutional capacity can be counterproductive. Voivodeship-level coordination without municipal implementation is similarly constrained. The optimal governance system integrates multiple scales, leveraging comparative advantages, namely: municipal legitimacy and responsiveness, district implementation capacity, voivodeship coordination and learning, major city resource concentration, and national or international networks for integration and knowledge transfer.

This multi-level systems perspective yields direct policy implications. Instead of pursuing further decentralisation, which can weaken already strained municipalities, or centralisation, which can distance governance from residents, reforms should prioritise inter-level integration mechanisms. These mechanisms should empower districts as implementation platforms, enable voivodeships to coordinate regional networks, and support municipalities in engaging communities within defined frameworks. Infrastructure investments, due to their ability to generate consensus across scales, offer strategic entry points for developing such integration mechanisms.

The governance scale paradox is resolved when approached from the systems perspective: each scale achieves optimal effectiveness within its functional domain, and overall effectiveness emerges through integration rather than competition for dominance.

A synthesis of key findings – the multidimensional reality of rural development effectiveness

The empirical analysis in Sections 3 through 5 identifies consistent patterns in the stakeholder perceptions of local sustainable development strategy effectiveness and the factors influencing success. The research substantiates the five-dimensional sustainability framework as a robust organising principle for comprehensive rural development assessment. Quantitative ratings across the five dimensions (Sections 3.2–3.4) indicate that the respondents distinguish between social, economic, environmental, institutional, and spatial sustainability, with effectiveness perceived in various ways in each domain. Notably, the findings highlight that the institutional dimension and the spatial dimension, often overlooked in traditional assessment frameworks, represent conceptually distinct and empirically significant aspects of sustainability, not captured by the conventional three-pillar model.

The data reveals systemic variation in perceived effectiveness across strategy elements and territorial contexts for each sustainability dimension. Social sustainability – including community well-being, social inclusion, and social capital – generally receives moderate to favourable ratings, suggesting that strategies often address community-level social concerns. In contrast, environmental sustainability ratings vary widely, reflecting an inconsistent integration of environmental priorities into developmental planning. The institutional dimension and the spatial dimension exhibit the most pronounced perception gaps, with many respondents – especially community residents and local officials – reporting that current strategies insufficiently address institutional coordination, governance capacity, and spatial equity.

These findings underscore that development strategies should not be assessed as uniform entities but must be evaluated based on their multidimensional performance. A strategy may excel economically while underperforming environmentally or institutionally. Furthermore, effectiveness in one dimension often depends on interactions with others. For instance, robust institutional capacity – characterised by effective coordination, strong civil society, and functional partnerships – facilitates progress across multiple dimensions, including environmental management and spatial equity. Conversely, institutional weaknesses or coordination failures can impede advancement even when objectives and resources are well-defined.

The participation paradox and community engagement reality

A notable and counterintuitive finding in Section 4 is the participation paradox: increased formal community participation does not necessarily lead to higher satisfaction or perceived effectiveness. The analysis indicates that only genuine participation – i.e., where residents have real influence, transparent communication exists, and strategies are adjusted in response to feedback – correlates with improved satisfaction and perceived effectiveness. In contrast, consultative mechanisms that

offer limited actual influence often result in frustration and cynicism rather than engagement.

This finding highlights a significant disconnect between the rhetoric and practice of participatory development. While many strategies include mechanisms such as consultations and stakeholder committees to fulfil engagement requirements, these often function within predetermined parameters set by external actors. As a result, participation is perceived as performative rather than substantive. Community residents are aware of these limitations, as evidenced by open-ended responses (Sections 3.6.2–3.6.5), which express scepticism about the actual influence of residents' input on strategy implementation.

The criteria articulated by residents – including dignity, voice, livelihood sustainability, cultural preservation, and family well-being – provide empirical support for shifting from macro-economic indicators to assessment frameworks focused on dignity and the quality of life. This theoretical reframing is directly informed by stakeholder experiences and priorities (see Text Box).

Success Redefined: Resident Criteria for Development Effectiveness

“Success is not an abstract economic metric. It means having meaningful work, being able to stay in or return to the village, having good schools and healthcare, and feeling that my voice matters.”

— Respondent synthesis (both countries, resident perspective)

“Dignified life means access to basic services, good communication, opportunities for development, and being respected in decisions that affect your community.”

— Representative resident definition (both countries)

“Development works when it respects local culture, preserves heritage, creates employment opportunities, and improves the quality of life as residents define it.”

— Respondent (Poland, local authority/NGO)

“The measure of strategy success is not how much money flowed or how many projects completed, but whether people – especially young people – can stay here and build good lives.”

— Representative resident evaluation (both countries)

The analysis also demonstrates that community participation is heterogeneous and unevenly distributed. Formal mechanisms tend to engage individuals with higher education, greater time availability, and established social connections, while marginalised groups, those with demanding livelihoods, and geographically isolated residents participate less or not at all. This results in a representativeness problem, as formal mechanisms can only reflect the views of a narrow segment of the community. Achieving resident-centred development requires restructuring engagement processes to ensure inclusivity across all community groups.

Stakeholder divergence and the institutional-resident perspective gap

Another key finding involves systemic differences in the stakeholder perceptions of strategy effectiveness and priorities, as detailed in Sections 3.7–3.9. Community residents, local government officials, and external experts often diverge in their assessments and in the prioritisation of dimensions and objectives. These divergences are patterned and reflect the distinct roles, interests, and perspectives of each group.

The most pronounced divergence occurs in the assessments of institutional effectiveness. Local government officials typically rate institutional and governance capacity more favourably than community residents do, likely due to their direct involvement in formal arrangements. Residents, however, often perceive institutional barriers, coordination failures, and unfulfilled commitments. They also report limited mechanisms for holding institutions accountable. Government officials, for their part, can view their efforts as reasonable given resource constraints. This gap between institutional self-assessment and resident experience poses a significant challenge to strategy effectiveness, since perceived institutional barriers undermine developmental outcomes.

External experts and community residents also frequently prioritise different objectives. Experts, informed by the best international practices, often emphasise environmental management and long-term planning, while residents focus on immediate economic and social needs. Although both perspectives are valid, failure to acknowledge and integrate these differences can result in strategies that overlook urgent community concerns. Effective strategy design requires explicit negotiation and integration of both expert and resident perspectives.

The five dimensions in practice – integration and interaction patterns

An analysis of multidimensional effectiveness (Sections 3.3–3.4) demonstrates that the five dimensions interact significantly in determining overall strategy success. These dimensions are interdependent, with performance in one often enabling or constraining progress in others.

Economic and social dimensions are strongly correlated in respondent assessments. Strategies that effectively promote economic development and livelihood opportunities are also seen as enhancing social cohesion and community well-being. This relationship underscores that economic development is closely tied to social stability and must be approached with attention to the distribution of benefits and the impact on social capital.

In contrast, environmental and economic dimensions often exhibit tension in stakeholder perceptions. Strategies that excel economically are frequently seen as lacking in environmental sustainability, and *vice versa*. This reflects real trade-offs between short-term economic gains and long-term environmental goals. The research indicates that integrated approaches balancing both dimensions are uncommon, highlighting a strategic gap in achieving truly sustainable rural development.

Institutional and spatial dimensions are identified as critical enablers for progress in the social, economic, and environmental domains. Regions with strong institutional capacity and favourable spatial characteristics consistently receive higher effectiveness ratings. This suggests that institutional capacity-building and spatial development are essential strategic priorities, foundational for achieving sustainability across other dimensions.

Context-specific findings – a comparison between Poland and Belarus

The cross-national analysis in Section 4. identifies both common rural development challenges and context-specific patterns. Residents in both countries report concerns about outmigration, inadequate services, limited livelihoods, and weak institutions. These shared issues reflect broader regional trends and create opportunities for cross-national learning and the transfer of effective approaches.

The analysis also highlights significant context-specific differences. Polish communities are more influenced by EU funding mechanisms and regulatory frameworks, which shape both opportunities and constraints for development. In contrast, Belarusian communities operate within a different institutional context, where the state authority and administrative mechanisms are more central. Differences also exist in civil society capacity, the private sector engagement, and historical institutional development.

These differences indicate that while some development approaches are transferable, their effectiveness depends on adaptation to local institutional structures, regulatory frameworks, and community capacities. Successful strategies in one context may require a significant modification in another, underscoring the need for context-sensitive development planning.

Theoretical implications – towards systemic approaches to rural resilience

The findings advocate for a systemic understanding of rural resilience, moving beyond linear, single-cause models to view rural development as a complex adaptive system with interacting dimensions, feedback loops, and emergent properties. This perspective yields several theoretical implications.

First, rural resilience results from the interaction of multiple dimensions, not from isolated excellence in any single area. Achieving true resilience requires coordinated progress across all five dimensions as well as careful management of trade-offs. This necessitates explicit multidimensional assessment and integrated strategy development, rather than isolated sectoral interventions.

Second, institutional capacity and governance effectiveness are foundational to rural resilience. Institutions play an active role in co-creating resilience by coordinating action, allocating resources, maintaining accountability, and adapting to change. Without institutional development, rural resilience is unsustainable, and external interventions that bypass local institutions have limited long-term impact.

Third, spatial relationships and territorial equity are critical determinants of rural resilience. Isolated communities or those lacking infrastructure face structural barriers that cannot be addressed by local efforts alone. Achieving resilience requires investment in spatial development and coordination across multiple governance levels, highlighting the role of national and regional governments.

Finally, community agency and engagement is essential for resilience, but must be supported by enabling the institutional and spatial contexts. Participatory processes alone are insufficient if institutional or spatial barriers persist. An effective development integrates both top-down and bottom-up approaches, ensuring that higher-level interventions create conditions for meaningful community action.

The evidence base for recommendations – leveraging five-dimensional assessment

The research provides evidence-based recommendations for enhancing the design, implementation, and evaluation of local sustainable development strategies. These recommendations are grounded in empirical patterns and account for context-specific variations, rather than offering prescriptive mandates.

On the institutional dimension. Local strategies require explicit institutional assessment and capacity-building components. This assessment should systemically examine coordination mechanisms among relevant government agencies, civil society engagement and organisational capacity, private sector participation, and mechanisms for multi-stakeholder collaboration. Capacity-building should address not only technical skills in specific sectors (agriculture, tourism, and environmental management), but, fundamentally, the capacity for strategic coordination and mutual accountability among institutions. Institutional development should include mechanisms for translating community input into actual strategy adjustment, moving from consultation to genuine co-management models where residents have a meaningful voice in decisions.

On the spatial dimension. Regional and national governments should undertake explicit spatial assessment, identifying territorial disparities in development opportunities, service distribution, and infrastructure connectivity. Development strategies should include targeted spatial equity objectives, with dedicated investment in reducing territorial isolation and ensuring equitable access to services and opportunities. Multi-scale governance mechanisms should be institutionalised to ensure that local-level strategies align with regional and national spatial development frameworks.

On the economic dimension. While economic development is essential to rural resilience, diversification rather than specialisation should be prioritised. Economies dependent on single sectors or industries are vulnerable to market fluctuations and technological change. Strategies should foster diverse livelihood opportunities across agriculture, tourism, small-scale manufacturing, and service sectors, with particular attention to livelihood security for the most economically-vulnerable

populations. Economic strategies should be explicitly assessed for social inclusivity and environmental impacts, not pursued in isolation from these dimensions.

On the social dimension. Community cohesion, inclusion, and the reduction of inequality should be explicit strategic objectives alongside economic development. Social strategies should address not only formal institutions and programmes, but also informal social capital formation, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and the inclusion of historically marginalised populations (women, minority groups, youth, elderly). Social sustainability requires intentional community relationship-building, not the assumption that social capital will emerge spontaneously from other developmental activities.

On the environmental dimension. Environmental sustainability should be integrated throughout all development sectors and strategies, not confined to dedicated environmental programmes. Agricultural development should incorporate environmental stewardship; economic development should pursue low-carbon and resource-efficient pathways; social development should promote environmental awareness and responsibility. Long-term sustainability imperatives (climate adaptation, biodiversity protection, sustainable resource management) should be explicitly balanced with near-term livelihood needs in strategy design.

Research limitations and directions for future inquiry

Despite offering substantial evidence on rural resilience, sustainable development effectiveness, and resident-centred assessment, the monograph acknowledges several important limitations that inform directions for future research.

First, the research is confined to Poland and Belarus, with relatively small sample sizes, limiting generalisability to other rural contexts. Future studies should apply the methodology to additional regions in order to determine which elements of the five-dimensional framework and recommendations are universally applicable and which require adaptation.

Second, the research is cross-sectional, capturing stakeholder perceptions at a single point in time. Longitudinal studies tracking communities over multiple years would provide stronger evidence on how strategy characteristics influence development outcomes and how communities adapt strategies over time.

Third, although resident perspectives are included, the stakeholder sample could be more diverse. Future research should over-sample marginalised and underrepresented groups to ensure comprehensive representation. Gender-disaggregated and intergenerational analyses would also provide valuable insights into the differing perceptions of strategy effectiveness.

Fourth, while the research identifies correlations among variables, it offers limited insight into causal mechanisms. Qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews and anthropologic, ethnographic, and community science observation could clarify how institutional capacity, spatial equity, and participation influence outcomes, enabling more targeted interventions.

Finally, although the research identifies perceived barriers and proposes solutions, systemic implementation research is needed to examine how strategies are enacted in practice, the challenges encountered, and how successful communities overcome obstacles. Understanding implementation dynamics is essential for bridging the gap between strategy and practice.

A forward-looking vision – institutionalising resident-centred, multidimensional rural development assessment

This study advocates the adoption of resident-centred, multidimensional assessment as a standard in rural development scholarship and practice. Systemic resident-centred assessment should become an ongoing governance mechanism, incorporating regular community input, transparent reporting, and explicit strategy adjustments based on assessment outcomes.

Institutionalising resident-centred assessment marks a significant departure from the current practice. It necessitates the development of accessible assessment tools, regular assessment cycles, and spaces for systemic resident evaluation of strategies. Transparency in reporting and decision-making, capacity-building at the local and regional levels, and the recognition of assessment as an ongoing process of learning and adaptation are all also essential.

The five-dimensional framework, when applied through systemic resident-centred assessment, offers the conceptual foundation for institutionalised approaches. It ensures a comprehensive evaluation of development strategies across all dimensions as well as encourages intentional management of trade-offs.

A final reflection – rural resilience as ongoing democratic engagement

This research reconceptualises rural resilience as an ongoing process of collective learning and adaptive action, rather than a technical achievement or a fixed destination. Rural communities continuously engage with fundamental questions about their future, values, capacities, resource needs, and the management of trade-offs as circumstances evolve.

Viewing resilience as democratic engagement has significant implications. It emphasises that the quality of governance and institutional effectiveness are central to resilience, surpassing the impact of technical interventions. Listening to resident voices, especially marginalised perspectives, is essential, and community deliberation holds intrinsic value as an expression of agency and participation.

The concluding perspectives of residents encapsulate the central finding of this study: rural sustainable development strategies are most effective when co-produced with communities as genuine partners, responsive to locally-defined needs, and oriented towards dignity and the quality of life rather than remote economic indicators. This outcome validates the resident-centred assessment paradigm that underpins this research (see Text Box).

The Core Lesson: Resident Voice on Rural Sustainable Development

“The most important thing is that people are heard.”

— Respondent 156 (Poland)

“We need thinking about the village as a social space, not just a productive one. Village residents want dignified conditions – this is not a demand, it is a right.”

— Representative resident and academic voice (Poland)

“Strategies succeed when they are developed with residents, address real needs, provide genuine participation, and deliver tangible improvements in the quality of life.”

— Synthesised resident expectation (both countries)

“The most important foundation is trust and cooperation. Without them, even well-designed strategies fail. With them, much is possible.”

— Representative synthesis (both countries)

The evidence throughout this monograph – from diverse stakeholder perspectives and comparative analyses – consistently supports these conclusions. Rural communities in Poland and Belarus exhibit strong capacity for reflection, discernment, and creative problem-solving. However, these capacities are underutilised when genuine participation is limited or when institutional and spatial barriers persist. Rural resilience is executed when communities are empowered to shape their futures within supportive institutional and spatial contexts.

Future rural development scholarship and practice should prioritise establishing institutional and governance conditions that facilitate genuine community engagement in strategy design, implementation, and evaluation. The five-dimensional framework, when used in resident-centred assessment, offers practical tools for this purpose. The key challenge ahead is to transition from conceptual innovation to institutional and organisational change, making resident-centred, multidimensional assessment a standard practice.

The findings of this study indicate that local development strategies devoid of genuine participation do not merely lose effectiveness – they risk producing an illusion of development. When strategies function primarily as administrative artefacts rather than socially-embedded processes, they can stabilise the existing inequalities, suppress local agency, and weaken long-term resilience. In this sense, participation is not an optional procedural addition, but a constitutive condition of strategic effectiveness.

References

- Adam-Hernández, A., & Harteisen, U. (2019). A Proposed Framework for Rural Resilience – How can peripheral village communities in Europe shape change? *AGER: Revista de Estudios sobre Despoblación y Desarrollo Rural (Journal of Depopulation and Rural Development Studies)*, 28, 7–42. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.4422/ager.2019.05>
- Adisaputri, G., Khan, A., Cameranesi, M., & Ungar, M. (2023). Rural resilience and mobility: A scoping review. *The Journal of Rural and Community Development*, 18(3), 21–42.
- Agasisti, T., Agostino, D., & Soncin, M. (2020). Implementing Performance Measurement Systems in Local Governments: Moving from the “How” to the “Why.” *Public Performance & Management Review*, 43(5), 1100–1128. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15309576.2019.1700806>
- Ahner-McHaffie, T. W., Guest, G., Petrunej, T., Eterno, A., & Dooley, B. (2018). Evaluating the impact of integrated development: are we asking the right questions? A systematic review. *Gates Open Research*, 1, 6. <https://doi.org/10.12688/gatesopenres.12755.2>
- Allmendinger, P., & Haughton, G. (2010). Spatial Planning, Devolution, and New Planning Spaces. *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy*, 28(5), 803–818. <https://doi.org/10.1068/c09163>
- Amelchanka, A. A., et al. (2010). *Orleuski region: Strategy of sustainable development*. IP “Altiora – Living Paints”.
- Ashkenazy, A., Calvão Chebach, T., Knickel, K., Peter, S., Horowitz, B., & Offenbach, R. (2018). Operationalising resilience in farms and rural regions – Findings from fourteen case studies. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 59, 211–221. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2017.07.008>
- Babitsky, D., et al. (2017). *Sporava + Zdzitava: Together for sustainable development (Strategy of social and economic development of the Sporava village council)*. IVC of the Ministry of Finance.
- Banks, N., & Hulme, D. (2012). *NGOs, civil society and development*. <https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:154833803>
- Barca, F., McCann, P., & Rodríguez-Pose, A. (2012). THE CASE FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT INTERVENTION: PLACE-BASED VERSUS PLACE-NEUTRAL APPROACHES*. *Journal of Regional Science*, 52(1), 134–152. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9787.2011.00756.x>
- Beltramo, R., Peira, G., Pasino, G., & Bonadonna, A. (2024). Quality of Life in Rural Areas: A Set of Indicators for Improving Wellbeing. *Sustainability*, 16(5), 1804. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su16051804>
- Berkes, F., & Ross, H. (2013). Community Resilience: Toward an Integrated Approach. *Society & Natural Resources*, 26(1), 5–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920.2012.736605>

- Bertolozzi-Caredio, D., Rosati, G., & Frascarelli, A. (2021). Assessing Rural Resilience for Endogenous, Sustainable Development: An Emblematic Case. *Review of Economics and Institutions*, 12(2). <http://dx.doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6816073>
- Beszedics-Jäger, B. S., & Buzási, A. (2024). Evaluating the effectiveness of urban sustainability and climate objectives: a comparative approach. *Discover Sustainability*, 5(1), 269. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43621-024-00475-0>
- Bianchi, S., & Richiedei, A. (2023). Territorial Governance for Sustainable Development: A Multi-Level Governance Analysis in the Italian Context. *Sustainability*, 15(3), 2526. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15032526>
- Börzel, T. A., & Risse, T. (2010). Governance without government in post-communist Europe: Explaining the roles of international organisations. *The Review of International Organisations*, 5(2), 125–148.
- Bychko, G. P., et al. (2017). *Zalesse and Kreva: Strategy of sustainable development for the period from 2016 to 2030* (A. U. Sivagrakau, Ed.). IVC of the Ministry of Finance
- Cagliero, R., Cristiano, S., Pierangeli, F., & Tarangioli, S. (2011). *Evaluating the Improvement of Quality of Life in Rural Areas*.
- Charbit, C. (2011). *Governance of public policies in decentralised contexts: The multi-level approach* (OECD Regional Development Working Paper No. 2011/04). OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/5kg883pkxkxhc-en>
- Cheshire, L., Esparcia, J., & Shucksmith, M. (2015). *Community resilience, social capital and territorial governance*. https://ruralager.org/wp-content/uploads/Ager-18_01.pdf
- Cox, R. S., & Hamlen, M. (2015). Community Disaster Resilience and the Rural Resilience Index. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 59(2), 220–237. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764214550297>
- Dana, L.-P., Gurău, C., Hoy, F., Ramadani, V., & Alexander, T. (2021). Success factors and challenges of grassroots innovations: Learning from failure. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 164, 119600. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2019.03.009>
- Developmental evaluation*. (n.d.). Retrieved June 14, 2025, from <https://www.betterevaluation.org/methods-approaches/approaches/developmental-evaluation>
- Dillard, M. K., Walpole, E., & Loerzel, J. (2024). *A review of community resilience indicators using a systems measurement framework*. <https://doi.org/10.6028/NIST.SP.2300-01>
- Dziemianowicz, W., Szmigiel-Rawska, K., Nowicka, P., & Dąbrowska, A. (2012). *Planowanie strategiczne. Poradnik dla pracowników administracji publicznej*. Ministerstwo Rozwoju Regionalnego.
- Farrell, A. L., Banks, A. R., Skinner, D., & Kelleher, K. J. (2025). Resident-reported measurements of neighborhood characteristics: a scoping review. *Journal of Public Health*, 33(1), 93–108. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10389-023-01954-w>
- Forrest, N., & Wiek, A. (2015). Success factors and strategies for sustainability transitions of small-scale communities – Evidence from a cross-case analysis. *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, 17, 22–40. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eist.2015.05.005>
- Gibson, T., & Wisner, B. (2019). Global Overview of the Role of Non-Governmental Organizations in Natural Hazard Governance. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Natural Hazard Science*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199389407.013.187>

- Gillespie-Marthaler, L., Nelson, K., Baroud, H., & Abkowitz, M. (2019). Selecting Indicators for Assessing Community Sustainable Resilience. *Risk Analysis*, 39(11), 2479–2498. <https://doi.org/10.1111/risa.13344>
- Gkartzios, M., Gallent, N., & Scott, M. (2022). A capitals framework for rural areas: ‘Place-planning’ the global countryside. *Habitat International*, 127, 102625. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.habitatint.2022.102625>
- Hamilton, S. H., Merritt, W. S., Lim-Camacho, L., Carter, L., Cosijn, M., & Roth, C. H. (2019). Integrated assessment frameworks for understanding pathways for socially inclusive agricultural intensification. *El Sawah, S. (ed.) MODSIM2019, 23rd International Congress on Modelling and Simulation*. <https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:241683656>
- Harbiankova, A., & Gertsberg, L. (2022). Information Model for Sustainable Rural Development. *Energies*, 15(11). <https://doi.org/10.3390/en15114009>
- Harbiankova, A., & Shcherbina, E. (2021). Evaluation model for sustainable development of settlement system. *Sustainability (Switzerland)*, 13(21). <https://doi.org/10.3390/su132111778>
- Harbiankova, A., Sivagrakau, A., Rosa, A., & Kalinowski, S. (2025). Local Diversity Under Pressure: How Centralization Affects Sustainable Development Vectors and Initiatives. *Sustainability*, 18(1), 30. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su18010030>
- Hardi, P., & Zdan, T. (1997). *Assessing sustainable development: principles in practice*. <https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:127539159>
- Hass, J.L., Brunvoll, F., Hoie, H. (2002). *Overview of Sustainable Development Indicators used by National and International Agencies*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/838562874641>
- Heijman, W., Hagelaar, G., & van der Heide, M. (2007). Rural Resilience as a New Development Concept. *100th Seminar*.
- Heijman, W., Hagelaar, G., & van der Heide, M. (2019). *Rural Resilience as a New Development Concept*, (pp. 195–211). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-28642-2_11
- Hofer, K., Wicki, M., & Kaufmann, D. (2024). Public support for participation in local development. *World Development*, 178, 106569. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2024.106569>
- Isidiho, A. O., & Sabran, M. S. B. (2016). Evaluating the Top-Bottom and Bottom-Up Community Development Approaches: Mixed Method Approach as Alternative for Rural Un-Educated Communities in Developing Countries. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 266–273. <https://doi.org/10.5901/mjss.2016.v7n4p266>
- Janzen, R., Switzer, S., Basabose, J. de D., Docherty, M., & Heidebrecht, P. (2023). Community-Based Evaluation When Localizing Sustainable Development Goals. *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*, 38(2), 396–407. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cjpe.75810>
- Järvelä, M. (2023). Dimensions of cultural sustainability – Local adaptation, adaptive capacity and social resilience. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 5. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2023.1285602>
- Kapucu, N., Ge, Y., Rott, E., & Isgandar, H. (2024). Urban resilience: Multidimensional perspectives, challenges and prospects for future research. *Urban Governance*, 4(3), 162–179. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ugj.2024.09.003>

- Keahey, J. (2021). Sustainable Development and Participatory Action Research: A Systematic Review. *Systemic Practice and Action Research*, 34(3), 291–306. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11213-020-09535-8>
- Kempen, L. van (2014). Mansuri, Ghazala & Rao, Vijayendra: Localizing development. Does participation work? *Journal of Economics*, 112(2), 201–205. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00712-014-0394-4>
- Kirby, N., Stasiak, D., & von Schneidmesser, D. (2024). Community resilience through bottom-up participation: when civil society drives urban transformation processes. *Community Development Journal*, 60(3), 528–547. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsae031>
- Krastev, I. , & Holmes, S. (2019). *The light that failed: A reckoning*. Allen Lane.
- Lang, W., Hui, E. C., Chen, T., & Huang, Y. (2025). A pathway to empower rural resilience through rural computing: An exploratory study. *Applied Geography*, 176, 103530. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apgeog.2025.103530>
- Le Roy, D. (2024). *Stakeholder engagement: An essential part of sustainable development*. Retrieved November 29, 2025, from <https://sustenuto.com/insights/stakeholder-engagement-an-essential-part-of-sustainable-development>
- Li, H., Jin, X., Liu, J., Feng, D., Xu, W., & Zhou, Y. (2022). Analytical framework for integrating resources, morphology, and function of rural system resilience – An empirical study of 386 villages. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 365, 132738. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2022.132738>
- Li, Y. (2023). A systematic review of rural resilience. *China Agricultural Economic Review*, 15(1), 66–77. <https://doi.org/10.1108/CAER-03-2022-0048>
- Li, Y., Wang, S., Zhang, Y., & Du, G. (2024). The measurement of rural community resilience to natural disaster in China. *Scientific Reports*, 14(1), 20322. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-024-70719-6>
- Lowery, B., Dagevos, J., Chuenpagdee, R., & Vodden, K. (2020). Storytelling for sustainable development in rural communities: An alternative approach. *Sustainable Development*, 28(6), 1813–1826. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.2124>
- Łacka, I., Suproń, B., & Szczepaniak, I. (2024). Does Climate Change and Energy Consumption Affect the Food Security of European Union Countries? Empirical Evidence from a Panel Study. *Energies*, 17(13), 3237. <https://doi.org/10.3390/en17133237>
- Mathie, A., & Cunningham, G. (2003). From clients to citizens: Asset-based Community Development as a strategy for community-driven development. *Development in Practice*, 13(5), 474–486. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0961452032000125857>
- Matthews, P. (2013). The return of place in Scottish social policy. *Local Economy: The Journal of the Local Economy Policy Unit*, 28(1), 9–16. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0269094212463786>
- Matyulin, A. O., et al. (2014). *Čavusy is a place where you want to return: Local agenda for the 21st century for the city of Čavusy and Čavusy district. Supplement to the main text: The concept of housing development, energy saving and energy efficiency*. Polycraft.
- Measuring, Monitoring and Evaluating the SDGs*. (n.d.). Retrieved June 14, 2025, from <https://www.local2030.org/library/236/ICLEI-SDGs-Briefing-Sheets-06-Measuring-Monitoring-and-Evaluating-the-SDGs.pdf>
- Meerow, S., Newell, J. P., & Stults, M. (2016). Defining urban resilience: A review. *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 147, 38–49. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2015.11.011>

- Meirinawati, Prabawati, I., & Pradana, G. W. (2018). Strategy community development based on local resources. *Journal of Physics: Conference Series*, 953, 012158. <https://doi.org/10.1088/1742-6596/953/1/012158>
- Mensah, J. (2019). Sustainable development: Meaning, history, principles, pillars, and implications for human action: Literature review. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2019.1653531>
- Merritt, W. S., Hamilton, S. H., Bagchi, N. S., Baral, N., Carter, L., Chakraborty, A., Chakraborty, S., Cosijn, M., Das, M., Hossain, M. I., Jahan, H., Mishra, P., Paria, B., Rahman, M. W., Roth, C. H., Tallapragada, C., & Williams, L. J. (2022). Reflecting on an Integrated Approach to Understanding Pathways for Socially Inclusive Agricultural Intensification. *The Journal of Development Studies*, 58(8), 1569–1587. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2022.2029418>
- Meschede, C., & Mainka, A. (2020). Including Citizen Participation Formats for Drafting and Implementing Local Sustainable Development Strategies. *Urban Science*, 4(1), 13. <https://doi.org/10.3390/urbansci4010013>
- Meshack, O., & Awino, Z. (2025). Strategy Development, Implementation and Context in Organizational Stability: A Critical Literature Review. *International Journal of Business and Economics Research*, 14(2), 57–68. <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ijber.20251402.12>
- Meuwissen, M. P. M., Feindt, P. H., Spiegel, A., Termeer, C. J. A. M., Mathijs, E., de Mey, Y., Finger, R., Balmann, A., Wauters, E., Urquhart, J., Vigani, M., Zawalińska, K., Herrera, H., Nicholas-Davies, P., Hansson, H., Paas, W., Slijper, T., Coopmans, I., Vroege, W., Ciechomska, A., Accatino, F., Kopainsky, B., Poortvliet, P. M., Candel, J. J. L., Maye, D., Severini, S., Senni, S., Soriano, B., Lagerkvist, C.-J., Peneva, M., Gavrilescu, C., & Reidsma, P. (2019). A framework to assess the resilience of farming systems. *Agricultural Systems*, 176, 102656. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.agsy.2019.102656>
- Michalina, D., Mederly, P., Diefenbacher, H., & Held, B. (2021). Sustainable Urban Development: A Review of Urban Sustainability Indicator Frameworks. *Sustainability*, 13(16), 9348. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13169348>
- Moreira, S., Vanclay, F., & Esteves, A. M. (2022). Fallacies about communities that lead to failed community relations. *Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal*, 40(2), 156–167. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14615517.2021.2008600>
- Morozov, E. (2011). *The net delusion: The dark side of Internet freedom*. PublicAffairs.
- Most Significant Change. (2017). Retrieved May 14, 2025, from <https://www.intrac.org/app/uploads/2017/01/Most-significant-change.pdf>
- Nasser Salifu, G. A. (2025). Synergies and trade-offs of sustainable agricultural practices for improved food security in a developing country: a systematic review. *Cogent Food & Agriculture*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311932.2025.2518218>
- Nelson, K. S., Nguyen, T. D., Francois, J. R., & Ojha, S. (2023). Rural sustainability methods, drivers, and outcomes: A systematic review. *Sustainable Development*, 31(3), 1226–1249. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.2471>
- Nielsen, S. B., & Ejler, N. (2008). Improving Performance? *Evaluation*, 14(2), 171–192. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1356389007087538>
- Nkosi, S. M. (2015). Factors Affecting Strategy Implementation: A Case Study of A Local Municipality in Mpumalanga Province, South Africa. *European Journal of Business and Management*, 7, 29–35. <https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:28985478>

- Nordberg, K. (2020). Spatial Justice and local capability in rural areas. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 78, 47–58. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2020.06.008>
- Nowakowska, A. (2018). Od regionu do terytorium – reinterpretacja znaczenia przestrzeni w procesach rozwoju gospodarczego. *Gospodarka Narodowa. The Polish Journal of Economics*, 295(3), 5–22. <https://doi.org/10.33119/GN/97257>
- Noworól, A. (2024). Strategia rozwoju lokalnego w warunkach globalnej niepewności oraz zmian prawnych i technologicznych. *Rozwój Regionalny i Polityka Regionalna*, 70, 9–26.
- Outcome Harvesting. (2017). Retrieved May 14, 2025, from <https://www.intrac.org/app/uploads/2024/12/Outcome-harvesting.pdf>
- Ozili, P. K. (2024). *Theories of Sustainable Development* (pp. 1–12). <https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3693-7989-9.ch001>
- Paas, W., Accatino, F., Bijttebier, J., Black, J. E., Gavrilescu, C., Krupin, V., Manevska-Tasevska, G., Ollendorf, F., Peneva, M., San Martin, C., Zinnanti, C., Appel, F., Courtney, P., Severini, S., Soriano, B., Vigani, M., Zawalińska, K., van Ittersum, M. K., Meuwissen, M. P. M., & Reidsma, P. (2021). Participatory assessment of critical thresholds for resilient and sustainable European farming systems. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 88, 214–226. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2021.10.016>
- Paczka, E. (2018). Social dimension of the concept of sustainable development. *Studenckie Prace Prawnicze, Administratywistyczne i Ekonomiczne*, 22, 21–33. <https://doi.org/10.19195/1733-5779.22.2>
- Pakhomenko, A. N., et al. (2016). *Čavusy is a place where you want to return: Local agenda for the 21st century for the city of Čavusy and Čavusy district. A new look at the future*. Talerprint.
- Pakhomenko, E., et al. (2010). *Čavusy – a place where you want to return: Local agenda for the 21st century for the city of Čavusy and the Čavusy district*. Kovcheg.
- Pallaske, G. (2024). Analyzing sustainable development strategies through multi-method integration in the Green Economy Model. *Ecological Modelling*, 496, 110828. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolmodel.2024.110828>
- Pan, H., Liu, G., Muller, J.-P., Sun, Z., Yao, Y., Chang, Y., Xiong, Z., & Zhang, Y. (2024). Comprehensive Assessment of Sustainable Development of Terrestrial Ecosystem Based on SDG 15 – A Case Study of Guilin City. *Remote Sensing*, 17(1), 63. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rs17010063>
- Participatory Evaluation. How to implement it.* (n.d.). Retrieved May 14, 2025, from <https://www.wildeganzen.org/uploaded/2024/12/Part-2-Participatory-Planning-Monitoring-Evaluation-and-Learning.pdf>
- Perez Duran, G. D. J. (2025). How to Implement Management by Systems Based on a New Systems Theory. *International Journal Papier Public Review*, 6(1), 100–112. <https://doi.org/10.47667/ijppr.v6i1.348>
- Pertoldi, M., Fioretti, C., Guzzo, F., Testori, G., De Bruijn, M., Ferry, M., Kah, S., Servillo, L.A., Windisch, S. (2022). *Handbook of Territorial and Local Development Strategies* (Issue KJ-NA-31-263-EN-N (online), KJ-NA-31-263-EN-C (print)). Publications Office of the European Union. <https://doi.org/10.2760/57919> (online), [10.2760/133519](https://doi.org/10.2760/133519) (print)
- Pike, A., Rodríguez-Pose, A., & Tomaney, J. (2016). *Local and Regional Development*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315767673>

- Potter, J. (ed.) (2008). *Making Local Strategies Work: Building the Evidence Base, Local Economic and Employment Development (LEED)*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264044869-en>.
- Putnam, R. D., Leonardi, R., & Nonetti, R. Y. (1994). *Making Democracy Work*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt7s8r7>
- Rama, M., González-García, S., Andrade, E., Moreira, M. T., & Feijoo, G. (2020). Assessing the sustainability dimension at local scale: Case study of Spanish cities. *Ecological Indicators*, 117, 106687. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolind.2020.106687>
- Reed, M. S., Fraser, E. D. G., & Dougill, A. J. (2006). An adaptive learning process for developing and applying sustainability indicators with local communities. *Ecological Economics*, 59(4), 406–418. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2005.11.008>
- Reidsma, P., Accatino, F., Appel, F., Gavrilescu, C., Krupin, V., Manevska Tasevska, G., Meuwissen, M. P. M., Peneva, M., Severini, S., Soriano, B., Urquhart, J., Zawalińska, K., Zinnanti, C., & Paas, W. (2023). Alternative systems and strategies to improve future sustainability and resilience of farming systems across Europe: from adaptation to transformation. *Land Use Policy*, 134, 106881. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2023.106881>
- Reidsma, P., Meuwissen, M., Accatino, F., Appel, F., Bardaji, I., Coopmans, I., Gavrilescu, C., Heinrich, F., Krupin, V., Manevska-Tasevska, G., Peneva, M., Rommel, J., Severini, S., Soriano, B., Urquhart, J., Zawalińska, K., & Paas, W. (2020). How do Stakeholders Perceive the Sustainability and Resilience of EU Farming Systems? *EuroChoices*, 19(2), 18–27. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1746-692X.12280>
- Ribeiro, P. J. G., & Pena Jardim Gonçalves, L. A. (2019). Urban resilience: A conceptual framework. *Sustainable Cities and Society*, 50, 101625. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scs.2019.101625>
- Sánchez-Sellero, M.-C., García-Carro, B., & Sánchez-Sellero, P. (2021). Synthetic Indicators of Quality of Subjective Life in the EU: Rural and Urban Areas. *Prague Economic Papers*, 30(5), 529–551. <https://doi.org/10.18267/j.pep.783>
- Sandoval-Almazán, R., Criado, J. I., & Ruvalcaba-Gómez, E. A. (2021). Different perceptions, different open government strategies: The case of local Mexican public managers. *Information Polity*, 26(1), 87–102. <https://doi.org/10.3233/IP-180100>
- Sankaran, K., & Demangeot, C. (2017). Conceptualizing virtual communities as enablers of community-based entrepreneurship and resilience. *Journal of Enterprising Communities: People and Places in the Global Economy*, 11(1), 78–94. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEC-02-2015-0017>
- SAT4SUD – Self-Assessment Tool for Sustainable Urban Development strategies. (n.d.). Retrieved May 14, 2025, from <https://urban.jrc.ec.europa.eu/sustainable-development/strategies/sat4sud/?lng=en>
- SAT4TER – Self-Assessment Tool for Territorial and Local Development strategies. (n.d.). Retrieved May 14, 2025, from <https://urban.jrc.ec.europa.eu/sustainable-development/strategies/sat4ter/?lng=en>
- Schouten, M. A. H., van der Heide, M. M., & Heijman, W. J. M. (2009). Resilience Of Social-Ecological Systems In European Rural Areas: Theory And Prospects. *113th Seminar, December 9-11, 2009*.
- Scott, M. (2013). Resilience: a Conceptual Lens for Rural Studies? *Geography Compass*, 7(9), 597–610. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12066>

- Seghezzo, L. (2009). The five dimensions of sustainability. *Environmental Politics*, 18(4), 539–556. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644010903063669>
- Self-Assessment Tool for Sustainable Local Development. (n.d.). Retrieved May 12, 2025, from <https://www.local2030.org/library/172/Self-assessing-Sustainable-Local-Development-A-Tool-for-Eastern-Europe-and-Central-Asia.pdf>
- Sharifi, A. (2016). A critical review of selected tools for assessing community resilience. *Ecological Indicators*, 69, 629–647. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolind.2016.05.023>
- Sharifi, A., & Yamagata, Y. (2016). On the suitability of assessment tools for guiding communities towards disaster resilience. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 18, 115–124. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdr.2016.06.006>
- Sivagrakau, A. (2007). *Dumayem global'no, deystvuyem lokal'no. Strategii ustoychivogo razvitiya – Mestnyye povestki na XXI vek v Belarusi* [Думаем глобально, действуем локально. Стратегии устойчивого развития – местные повестки на ххi век в Беларуси]. Propilei.
- Sivagrakau, A. (2008). *Local Agenda 21 in Belarus: From Theory to Implementation. 1999 – 2006*. Propilei.
- Sivagrakau, A. (2018). Development and implementation of sustainable development strategies of territories in the context of self-government and decentralization. *Environmental Economics and Sustainable Development*, 3-4(22-23), 25–34. [https://doi.org/10.37100/2616-7689/2018/3-4\(22-23\)/3](https://doi.org/10.37100/2616-7689/2018/3-4(22-23)/3)
- Snell, K., Fabricius, A., Stroud, K., & O'Doherty, K. C. (2022). Investigating Quality of Life from the Perspectives of Older Adults in Local Communities. *Journal of Aging & Social Policy*, 34(4), 588–606. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08959420.2021.1927618>
- Steiner, A., & Atterton, J. (2015). Exploring the contribution of rural enterprises to local resilience. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 40, 30–45. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2015.05.004>
- Suárez Roldan, C., Méndez Giraldo, G. A., & López Santana, E. (2023). Sustainable Development in Rural Territories within the Last Decade: A Review of the State of the Art. *Heliyon*, 9(7), e17555. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e17555>
- Svarstad, H., & Benjaminsen, T. A. (2017). Nothing succeeds like success narratives: a case of conservation and development in the time of REDD. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 11(3), 482–505. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2017.1356622>
- Szczepaniak, I., Olech, I., & Szymańska, E. J. (2025). The Use of Canola for Biofuel Production in the Context of Energy Security – A Systematic Literature Review. *Energies*, 18(10), 2410. <https://doi.org/10.3390/en18102410>
- Szetey, K., Moallemi, E. A., Ashton, E., Butcher, M., Sprunt, B., & Bryan, B. A. (2021). Participatory planning for local sustainability guided by the Sustainable Development Goals. *Ecology and Society*, 26(3), Article 16. <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-12566-260316>
- Tao, T., Ma, L., Liu, Y., Tang, H., Wang, X., & Wu, S. (2025). A systematic framework for rural resilience assessment in the rural Gansu Province, China. *Environmental Impact Assessment Review*, 110, 107715. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eiar.2024.107715>
- Terra dos Santos, L. C., Frimaio, A., Giannetti, B. F., Agostinho, F., Liu, G., & Almeida, C. M. V. B. (2023). Integrating Environmental, Social, and Economic Dimensions to Monitor Sustainability in the G20 Countries. *Sustainability*, 15(8), 6502. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15086502>

- Theory of Change and Logic Models*. (n.d.). Retrieved May 14, 2025, from https://pcar.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdfs/tab_2018_logic_models_508.pdf
- Thorsøe, M., Noe, E., Maye, D., Vigani, M., Kirwan, J., Chiswell, H., Grivins, M., Adamson-Fiskovica, A., Tisenkopfs, T., Tsakalou, E., Aubert, P.-M., & Loveluck, W. (2020). Responding to change: Farming system resilience in a liberalized and volatile European dairy market. *Land Use Policy*, 99, 105029. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2020.105029>
- Tsyvinsky, G. I., et al. (2017). *Strategy of sustainable development of Zhaludok–Orlyia region, Shchuchin district of Hrodna region, for the period from 2017 to 2030*. IVC of the Ministry of Finance.
- United Nations Development Programme. (2012). *Civil society in the world: The role of non-governmental organisations*.
- Varga, A. (2017). Place-based, Spatially Blind, or Both? Challenges in Estimating the Impacts of Modern Development Policies. *International Regional Science Review*, 40(1), 12–37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0160017615571587>
- Viccaro, M., Romano, S., Prete, C., & Cozzi, M. (2021). Rural planning? An integrated dynamic model for assessing quality of life at a local scale. *Land Use Policy*, 111, 105742. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2021.105742>
- Wai, A. T. P., Nitivattananon, V., & Kim, S. M. (2018). Multi-stakeholder and multi-benefit approaches for enhanced utilization of public open spaces in Mandalay city, Myanmar. *Sustainable Cities and Society*, 37, 323–335. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scs.2017.10.038>
- Wendt, M. (2020). Comparing ‘deep’ insider knowledge: developing analytical strategies for cross-national qualitative studies. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 23(3), 241–254. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2019.1669927>
- Westlund, H., & Larsson, J. P. (Eds.). (2016). *Handbook of Social Capital and Regional Development*. Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781783476831>
- Williams, J. M., Chu, V., Lam, W.-F., & Law, W. W. Y. (2021). *Rural Revitalisation: Building Rural Resilience Through Collaborative Governance* (pp. 17–37). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-5824-2_2
- Wilson, G. A. (2012). Community resilience, globalization, and transitional pathways of decision-making. *Geoforum*, 43(6), 1218–1231. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2012.03.008>
- Wilson, G. A., Schermer, M., & Stotten, R. (2018). The resilience and vulnerability of remote mountain communities: The case of Vent, Austrian Alps. *Land Use Policy*, 71, 372–383. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2017.12.022>
- Woodbridge, M. (2015). *Local indicators for the 2030 agenda (sustainable development goals)*. Retrieved June 14, 2025, from <https://www.local2030.org/library/620/Local-Indicators-for-the-2030-Agenda-Sustainable-Development-Goals.pdf>
- Wu, X., & Yuan, Z. (2023). Understanding the socio-cultural resilience of rural areas through the intergenerational relationship in transitional China: Case studies from Guangdong. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 97, 303–313. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2022.12.001>
- Yang, Y., & Wang, Y. (2023). Exploring Rural Resilient Factors Based on Spatial Resilience Theory: A Case Study of Southern Jiangsu. *Land*, 12(9), 1677. <https://doi.org/10.3390/land12091677>

- Yusriadi, Y., & Andi Kaslin. (2025). Resilience of Rural Communities Facing Global Challenges. *Journal of Indonesian Scholars for Social Research*, 5(1), 65–72. <https://doi.org/10.59065/jissr.v5i1.174>
- Zawalińska, K., Wąs, A., Kobus, P., & Bańkowska, K. (2022). A framework linking farming resilience with productivity: empirical validation from Poland in times of crises. *Sustainability Science*, 17(1), 81–103. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-021-01047-1>
- Zhong, R., Pei, F., Yang, K., Xia, Y., Wang, H., & Yan, G. (2021). Coordinating socio-economic and environmental dimensions to evaluate regional sustainability – towards an integrative framework. *Ecological Indicators*, 130, 108085. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolind.2021.108085>
- Zhukovich, V. P., et al. (2010). *School + village: Together for joint development (Local Agenda 21 village Zdzitawa of Sporava rural council)*. IP “Altiora – Live Paints”.
- Zwolińska-Ligaj, M. A., & Guzal-Dec, D. J. (2024). Rural Area Resilience during the COVID-19 Pandemic as Exemplified by Urban–Rural Communes in Poland. *Sustainability*, 16(12), 5073. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su16125073>

Appendices

Appendix A. A glossary of sustainable development terms

GLOSSARY⁹

Agenda 21 (Agenda for the 21st Century) – a document adopted at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 by representatives of 179 countries. Agenda 21 is a fundamental international agreement on the problems of a balanced and integrated approach to environmental and developmental issues. Sustainable development is the central idea of Agenda 21. It is important to distinguish between the terms “Agenda 21” and “Local Agenda 21” (see below).

Civil society – a set of non-state public entities that unite citizens on the basis of free will and express their interests and desires. Civil society organisations include, in particular: public organisations and associations, parties and religious associations, foundations, clubs, initiatives, and other forms of public self-organisation. This sphere of society is sometimes called the third sector, along with two other sectors – the state and business.

Concept [Lat. *conceptio* – system, totality, sum]:

- 1) a system of views, a particular understanding of the phenomena of reality;
- 2) a single, defining idea, a brief summary, the main idea of a work or scientific paper;
- 3) a “big” plan that contains the main activities and deadlines for their implementation to achieve some goal, which is the basis for detailed planning.

Evaluation – a special event organised at the end of one strategy cycle and the beginning of the next.

Indicator – an observable and measurable characteristic of an object of study that makes it possible to judge its current or past state and, possibly, predict its changes.

Civic infrastructure – a system of material, technical, and institutional facilities and networks that ensure the functioning, connectivity, and development of a territory, support economic activity, provide basic public services, and shape the quality of life of the local population. In the context of local sustainable development, infrastructure includes transport and engineering systems (roads, transport facilities, energy, water supply, sanitation), social infrastructure (education, health care, social care, cultural facilities), as well as digital, environmental, and governance-related

⁹ In the context of this collective research, we use the following terms with the meanings given. This terminology has been researched and formulated by the authors over many years of work on local sustainable development (Sivagrakau, 2007; Sivagrakau & Lampert, 2022).

infrastructure that enables long-term the economic viability, social cohesion, and environmental resilience of the territory.

Institutionalisation – legal and organisational consolidation of certain social relations. When we talk about the institutional basis of any actions or programmes, we usually mean elements of legislation (normative acts) and organisation (formal and informal).

Local Agenda 21; Local Agenda for the 21st Century; Local (Territorial) Strategy for Sustainable Development – a process in which local authorities work in close cooperation with all sectors and layers of local society, creating and developing action plans to achieve sustainable development at the local level. The idea of Local Agendas was proposed as a tool for achieving sustainable development at the 1992 Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro. Local agendas are widespread in many countries around the world and are an effective tool for the sustainable development of local communities. It is important to distinguish between the terms “Local Agenda 21” and “Agenda 21”.

Local area:

- (1) a territory within a municipal formation, limited by historically established relations and/or having natural or natural boundaries – a yard, street, neighbourhood, village;
- (2) an area of compact residence of a homogeneous population (community).

Local community; commune; community – a territorial collective, a population permanently residing in a local territory, united by common interests and perceiving itself as a single whole. An important (but not mandatory) characteristic of a local community is the self-organisation of citizens at their place of residence, the presence of common governing and/or self-government bodies, as well as legally established borders and administrative status of the territory.

Local governance – legislatively established activities of the population to resolve issues of local importance, directly or through local self-government bodies, based on the interests of the population as well as its historical and other local traditions.

Localisation – linking to a locality, providing a phenomenon or product with local specificity, local flavour, and peculiarity.

Monitoring – a continuous process of collecting and systematising accurate data according to relevant indicators.

Non-governmental (non-state) organisation (NGO); public organisation – a non-profit organisation created without the participation of the state, the main sphere of which is public benefit. An NGO consists of people who share common interests, ideologies, and cultural affiliations outside of formal state bodies.

Partnership – a system of equal relationships between organisations and individuals with the purpose of achieving a common goal. The interaction and coordination of participants within the partnership – combining efforts and resources – allows them to increase their effectiveness, achieving a synergistic effect.

Region (*Latin regio* – area) – an area, district, territory, part of a country, region, district, which is distinguished by a set of natural, geographical, socioeconomic, and other characteristics; in international terminology – a territory that unites several countries (e.g., the Baltic Sea region).

Strategy [*Gr. strategía = stratos – army + ago – I lead*] – the most general plan of action, usually long-term, based on long-term forecasts; a choice of key directions of development that integrates the main goals, policies, and actions into a coherent whole.

Subsidiarity [Lat. *subsidiarius* – subsidiary] – an organisational and legal principle according to which tasks should be solved at the lowest, smallest, or most remote level from the centre, at which their solution is possible and effective. That is, the state should show initiative and take on tasks (offer its services and resources) only in those matters where the capabilities of independent individuals and their organisations (including local self-government) are insufficient. In the case when the task can be solved at the local level as effectively as at the national level, preference should be given to the local level.

Sustainable development (SD) – development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This UN definition is currently the most widely used. However, there are many other interpretations of this concept. The World Bank, for example, defines sustainable development as the management of society's total capital in the interest of preserving and enhancing human capabilities. Definitions of SD are often based on the need for the harmonious development of production (economy), people (social sphere), and the surrounding natural environment. In a number of definitions, the emphasis is on not exceeding the maximum permissible levels of anthropogenic impact on ecosystems. In our work, the term 'sustainable development' combines the above-mentioned approaches.

SWOT analysis – a method of analysis, which is usually implemented in the form of group work. The abbreviation 'SWOT' owes its origin to four English words: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. It is these characteristics of the analysed object or phenomenon that are recorded and evaluated in the process of a SWOT analysis.

Appendix B. The role and risks of state-sponsored NGOs in local development

Text Box 1

Fake NGOs, often referred to as State-Non-Governmental Organisations, are entities that are created or supported by state bodies to create a façade of civil society involvement. Their primary purpose is to simulate active participation and representation of citizens, particularly in countries where democratic practices are limited. This tactic is often employed by autocratic regimes to bolster their legitimacy both domestically and internationally, often misleading foreign observers regarding the state of civil society in the country. Researchers analysing this phenomenon draw attention to the harm that these organisations cause to public communities as well as to the overall development of territories and countries. Thus, in the book titled *The Light That Failed: A Reckoning*, Krastev and Holmes (2019) analyse the decline of democratic ideals in Eastern Europe and how authoritarian regimes manipulate civil society. The book highlights the use of fake NGOs to create a semblance of civic engagement, ultimately undermining genuine civil society movements. In the book titled *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*, Morozov (2011) discusses how the Internet is utilised by authoritarian regimes, including through the creation of NGOs that appear to use digital platforms for civic engagement. The author argues that these fake NGOs can distract from real issues and control the narrative surrounding civil liberties. In the article titled "Governance without government in post-communist Europe: Explaining the roles of international organisations", Börzel and Risse (2010) examine post-communist states and identify how governments collaborate with international organisations while simultaneously fostering fake NGOs. The book provides a framework for understanding how these entities serve state interests rather than genuine public needs.

Similar conclusions regarding fake NGOs are drawn by international organisations. Thus, the UNDP report (2012) titled *Civil Society in the World: The Role of Non-Governmental Organisations* reviews the role of NGOs globally and highlights how some states manufacture civil society support through fake organisations, particularly emphasising the risks of undermining genuine civic engagement in repressive contexts. In the annual report titled *Freedom in the World 2021: Democracy Under Siege*, Freedom House (2021) assesses the condition of political rights and civil liberties worldwide. The work discusses the rise of state-sponsored organisations that masquerade as NGOs in authoritarian contexts to undermine real civic opposition.

The International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law (IJNL) (2017) focuses on the regulatory environments in former USSR countries, examining how regimes employ fake NGOs to maintain control over civil society and promote state interests abroad while appearing to comply with international norms regarding civil engagement.

We can therefore conclude that fake NGOs serve as a tool for authoritarian regimes to create an illusion of civil engagement and democracy. By simulating the presence of civil society, such organisations can undermine genuine civic movements and mislead both domestic and international actors regarding the state of democracy in a country. Academic and international organisations' perspectives elucidate how these practices threaten authentic democratic processes, particularly in regions where governance is tightly controlled by the state.

Appendix C. A challenge sentiment analysis

Table C.1. A challenge sentiment analysis

Group	Dominant sentiment	Response
Local Government	Constructive/ Solutions	poprawa infrastruktury
Local Government	Constructive/ Solutions	większa liczba środków i przyspieszenie procesów związanych z dofinansowaniem i rozliczeniem inwestycji, rozwój potencjału lgd
Local Government	Constructive/ Solutions	regularna uczciwa analiza wyników = dobry monitoring, tworzenie procedur, które skłaniają organizacje lub inne podmioty do aktualizowania dokumentów
Local Government	Constructive/ Solutions	skuteczna komunikacja
Local Government	Constructive/ Solutions	dobra gospodarka przestrzenna i rozwój gospodarczy, który zapewni miejsca pracy
Local Government	Constructive/ Solutions	poprawa jakości dróg
Local Government	Constructive/ Solutions	skuteczne wdrażanie zaplanowanych działań, a także zapewnienie spójności i koordynacji między różnymi sektorami i interesariuszami
Local Government	Constructive/ Solutions	dobra współpraca interesariuszy – zaangażowanie uczestników procesu
Local Government	Constructive/ Solutions	najważniejsze są źródła finansowania oraz zasoby ludzkie/społeczne – możliwość skutecznej realizacji strategii
Local Government	Constructive/ Solutions	największe wyzwania, z jakimi można się spotkać w kontekście strategii, często obejmują takie kwestie jak: zmienność rynku i nieprzewidywalność otoczenia.
Local Government	Constructive/ Solutions	w oparciu o rozwój technologiczny skupić się na regionalizmie i wykorzystania ciszy małych miejscowości jako dobrego miejsca do życia
Local Government	Constructive/ Solutions	zwiększenie udziału mieszkańców w tworzeniu i wdrażaniu strategii – czyli rozwój mechanizmów partycypacji społecznej
Local Government	Constructive/ Solutions	poprawa komunikacji
Local Government	Constructive/ Solutions	deregulacja, decentralizacja oraz większe zaangażowanie społeczności lokalnych i organizacji pozarządowych (NGO) w tworzenie i wdrażanie inicjatyw lokalnych
Local Government	Hopeful/ Optimistic	pewność co do możliwości finansowania przyjętych w strategii założeń
Local Government	Hopeful/ Optimistic	zabezpieczone środki na ich realizację, lepsza dostępność środków dla potencjalnych partnerów mniejszych projektów jak organizacji pozarządowych

Group	Dominant sentiment	Response
Local Government	Hopeful/ Optimistic	budowanie świadomości społeczności lokalnych o możliwościach płynących z planowania działań i wdrażanie myślenia strategicznego na miarę możliwości mieszkańców
Local Government	Negative/ Critical	wyzwanie planistyczne, instytucjonalne, społeczne. zmiany: realne potrzeby, doświadczenie lokalnej społeczności, tworzyć niż narzucać
Local Government	Negative/ Critical	największym wyzwaniem były kwestie finansowe, w związku z długim czasem oceny wniosków zmieniały się koszty, które nie były planowane na etapie przygotowywań
Local Government	Negative/ Critical	złożoność procedur i biurokracja, niska aktywność mieszkańców i partnerów, nierównomierne wykorzystanie środków, problemy z trwałością i efektem długofalowym
Local Government	Negative/ Critical	założenia są słuszne, jednak głównym problemem są fundusze przeznaczone na ten cel, a raczej ich mała ilość
Local Government	Negative/ Critical	więcej zieleni, mniej blokowisk, ograniczenie patologicznej deweloperki (stłoczenie bloków, szeregówek, wycinanie drzew, ograniczanie terenów zielonych)
Local Government	Negative/ Critical	wprowadzenie uregulowań prawnych biorących pod uwagę specyfikę, wielkość i ograniczenia poszczególnych grup społeczności (gmin, miast, powiatów)
Local Government	Negative/ Critical	największym wyzwaniem jest utrzymanie współpracy partnerskiej po opracowaniu strategii, większe zaangażowanie partnerów wpłynęłoby pozytywnie na poprawę prz
Local Government	Negative/ Critical	zbyt niskie zaangażowanie mieszkańców, cele lds są „projektowe” na okres danego prow czy perspektywy, bez wizji rozwoju na 15–20 lat, lgd bywają obciążone
Local Government	Negative/ Critical	największe wyzwanie to ograniczona partycypacja społeczna, potrzebna zmiana to obowiązkowe powiązanie strategii lokalnych z realnym budżetem, harmonogramem inwestycji i systemem rozliczania postępów
Local Government	Negative/ Critical	brak strategii na terenie naszej gminy
Local Government	Negative/ Critical	największym wyzwaniem jest pozyskanie zainteresowania oraz zebranie osób chętnych do pracy na rzecz społeczności i strategii lokalnych
Local Government	Negative/ Critical	ograniczone zasoby finansowe i ludzkie to wyzwanie, które utrudnia skuteczne wdrażanie lokalnych strategii zrównoważonego rozwoju dla wszystkich zaangażowanych
Local Government	Negative/ Critical	na poprawę skuteczności przyszłych strategii pozytywnie wpłynęłoby jak największe zaangażowanie społeczności

Group	Dominant sentiment	Response
Local Government	Negative/ Critical	zainteresowanie infrastruktura wiejska małych do 10000 mieszkańców, brak wodociągu i kanalizacji
Local Government	Negative/ Critical	brak spójności między sektorami/obszarami, działania środowiskowe, transportowe, mieszkaniowe czy społeczne często są realizowane niezależnie, bez wspólnej wizji, niedostateczne zaangażowanie społeczności
Local Government	Negative/ Critical	brak Isr
Local Government	Negative/ Critical	największym wyzwaniem jest zapewnienie spójności działań w obszarze gospodarczym, społecznym i środowiskowym, edukacja na temat zrównoważonego rozwoju to zmiana, która najbardziej poprawiłaby przyszłość
Local Government	Negative/ Critical	problemem strategii jest to, że nie są traktowane poważnie, tylko robione, ponieważ akurat można na nie dostać dofinansowanie, a następnie chowane do szuflady
Residents	Constructive/ Solutions	wzmocnienie roli miasta jako ponadregionalnego centrum gospodarczego, co wymaga poprawy dostępności komunikacyjnej i infrastruktury transportowej, poprawa jakości życia mieszkańców i rozwój miasta
Residents	Constructive/ Solutions	dobry plan zagospodarowania przestrzennego
Residents	Hopeful/ Optimistic	większą możliwość działania i wsparcie dla organizacji pozarządowych, kgw, stowarzyszeń
Residents	Hopeful/ Optimistic	możliwość wypowiedzenia się wszystkich mieszkańców
Residents	Negative/ Critical	komunikacja strategii, diagnoza problemów i możliwości ich rozwiązania, ale także określenie wizji
Residents	Negative/ Critical	największe wyzwanie to konsultacje z mieszkańcami
Residents	Negative/ Critical	brak zaangażowania administracji lokalnej
Residents	Negative/ Critical	wyzwania związane z rozwojem turystyki na obszarach słabiej rozwiniętych w tym zakresie, zwiększenie środków na wdrażanie strategii
Residents	Frustrated/ Resigned	centralizacja, przyznawanie wsparcia na realizację strategii przez samorządy województw jest niestety kwestią polityczną
Academics/NGOs	Constructive/ Solutions	rozwój oparty na lokalnych zasobach, współpracy i aktywności mieszkańców np. tworzenie miejsc pracy, poprawa jakości życia, zachowanie dziedzictwa
Academics/NGOs	Constructive/ Solutions	rozwój
Academics/NGOs	Constructive/ Solutions	zwiększenie środków na zarządzanie i wdrażanie Isr, większą elastyczność i samoorganizacja na poziomie lokalnym, zmniejszenie biurokracji

Group	Dominant sentiment	Response
Academics/NGOs	Constructive/ Solutions	największe wyzwania to nieludzkie przepisy i durni urzędnicy, dla których kropka w dokumencie jest ważniejsza niż aktywność społeczna
Academics/NGOs	Hopeful/ Optimistic	potrzebujemy myślenia o wsi jako przestrzeni społecznej, nie tylko produkcyjnej, wieś to miejsce zamieszkania, życia, opieki, wspólnoty
Academics/NGOs	Negative/ Critical	znajomość wszystkich przepisów, zasad i wytycznych dotyczących przyszłych strategii przez rozpoczęciem jej pisania
Academics/NGOs	Hopeful/ Optimistic	to, co wcześniej wspomniałem, pozwoliło rozwiązać wiele problemów wdrażania strategii
Academics/NGOs	Negative/ Critical	organizacja spotkań z lokalną społecznością, brak przepływu informacji ze strony samorządu), większe zaangażowanie społeczności lokalnej, władz lokalnych
Academics/NGOs	Negative/ Critical	największym wyzwaniem była integracja pokoleniowa, współpraca partnerska z samorządami, przedsiębiorcami, ze stowarzyszeniami udało się, mamy wspólne planowanie
Other	Constructive/ Solutions	poprawa infrastruktury drogowej i budowa nowych dróg do rozbudowy niektórych miejscowości

Source: own elaboration.

List of Figures and Tables

Figure 1.1. Expanding the concept of rural sustainability	22
Figure 1.2. The concept of sustainability advanced for the community-led approach to local development	23
Figure 1.3. System of methods for assessing sustainable development at the local level	40
Figure 2.1. Prioritising the approach to local sustainable development	47
Figure 2.2. The selection of an appropriate methodology for the evaluation of local sustainable development strategies	49
Figure 2.3. Selecting tools for the evaluation of local sustainable development ..	49
Figure 2.4. The conceptual model for evaluating the effectiveness of local sustainable development strategy	52
Figure 2.5. Research Methodology / Mixed-Methods Research Approach	54
Figure 3.1. The perceived effectiveness of local sustainable development strategies	58
Figure 3.2. The distribution of sustainability scores	62
Figure 3.3. The correlation matrix for the five dimensions of sustainability	64
Figure 3.4. Mean dimension scores by major stakeholder categories	65
Figure 3.5. The distribution of responses about the factors considered most important for the success of local sustainable development strategies	67
Figure 3.6. The distribution of survey respondents by stakeholder category ...	72
Figure 3.7. The distribution of strategies by the duration of the implementation period	73
Figure 3.8. The distribution of local sustainable development strategies by implementation scale	73
Figure 3.9. The main sectors addressed in local sustainable development strategies	74
Figure 3.10. The distribution of effectiveness perceptions across different stakeholder categories	75
Figure 3.11. The distribution of the main development sectors across various implementation scales	75
Figure 3.12. Overall findings	76
Figure 3.13. Effectiveness ratings by stakeholders	77

Figure 3.14. Where do strategies perform best/worst? – performance by dimension	77
Figure 4.1. A comparison of mean dimension scores across five sustainability domains for three stakeholder categories	79
Figure 4.2. A radar chart comparing three stakeholder groups across five sustainability dimensions	80
Figure 4.3. A heat-map comparing mean ratings (1–5 scale) for sustainability indicators across three stakeholder groups (Local Government, Residents, Academics/NGO)	81
Figure 4.4. Top stakeholders' disagreements: eight sustainability indicators showing the greatest variation in ratings between stakeholder groups	83
Figure 4.5. A comparison of challenge priorities across three stakeholder groups showing different emphasis patterns	85
Figure 4.6. Where stakeholders disagree most – top 5 indicators with the greatest disagreement	88
Figure 4.7. Biggest challenges by respondents – the percentage of open-ended responses	88
Figure 4.8. A comparison of five sustainability dimension scores across different effectiveness perception categories	103
Figure 4.9. The quantitative impact of different success factors on overall sustainability dimension ratings	104
Figure 4.10. Engagement Level v. Ratings / Mean dimension scores by actual engagement in LDS processes	104
Figure 4.11. Effectiveness perception by strategy duration	105
Figure 4.12. A comparison of sustainability dimension scores across different implementation scales	106
Figure 4.13. Success Factor Quantity v. Overall Ratings/Correlation between the proportion of success factors identified by the respondents and their mean ratings for sustainability dimensions	106
Figure 4.14. Effectiveness by territorial level detailed	109
Figure 4.15. A comparison of five sustainability dimension scores across SDS of different territorial governance levels	110
Figure 4.16. Five-dimensional profiles of the effectiveness of sustainable development strategies at different levels of territorial governance	111
Figure 4.17. Challenges by territorial level	114
Figure 4.18. The distribution of development sectors addressed at different territorial governance levels	117
Figure 4.19. Success factors by territorial level	118
Figure 4.20. Sample distribution by territorial scale	119
Figure 5.1. The perceived effectiveness of LDS actions by Local Governments and Residents	126
Figure 5.2. Prioritised success factors by Local Governments and Residents ...	126
Figure 5.3. The participation paradox	131

Figure 5.4. Critical engagement $\neq$ Negativity	133
Figure 5.5. Role-based perception patterns	135
Figure 5.6. The reasons for stakeholders' divergent perceptions of effectiveness	137
Table 1.1. Definitions of rural resilience identified from literature review	15
Table 1.2. The theoretical framework for rural resilience and local development	19
Table 1.3. Spatial and regional planning frameworks	20
Table 1.4. Theoretical frameworks/concepts/methods of the research methodology	21
Table 1.5. Methodological approaches for assessment	21
Table 1.6. The key focus areas of the conceptual model of local sustainable development	25
Table 1.7. The availability of elements for assessing the effectiveness of local sustainable development strategies in <i>Progress Reports</i> and in reissues of strategies	41
Table 3.1. The distribution of the respondents by stakeholder category	57
Table 3.2. Perceived effectiveness by stakeholder category	60
Table 3.3. Descriptive statistics for sustainability dimensions	61
Table 3.4. The ANOVA results comparing stakeholder categories	66
Table 3.5. Dimension-specific insights	77
Table 4.1. Top-challenge categories	82
Table 4.2. Challenges by stakeholder type	85
Table 4.3. Challenge articulation and effectiveness ratings	86
Table 4.4. Questions with greatest stakeholder disagreement	87
Table 4.5. Questions with greatest stakeholder agreement	88
Table 4.6. Detailed challenge themes	90
Table 4.7. Sentiment distribution by stakeholder group	91
Table 4.8. An analysis of proposed solutions	92
Table 4.9. Empirical findings	94
Table 4.10. Response details on overall assessment scores	96
Table 4.11. Empirical findings – challenge emphasis by group	98
Table 4.12. Empirical findings – challenge response rates by dimension performance	100
Table 4.13. Key cross-comparison findings	107
Table 4.14. The characteristic strengths of SDS in voivodeships	112
Table 4.15. The characteristic of districts	113
Table 4.16. The characteristics of municipalities	114
Table 4.17. Strategic time horizons and the scale of governance	119
Table 4.18. Spatial dimension scores across governance levels	120
Table 4.19. Structural v. relational factors correlation by differences in perceived effectiveness	121
Table 4.20. Data for an analysis of a synergy effect	122

Table 4.21. Challenge awareness across specific dimensions 123

Table 5.1. Targeted sectors by group (% mentions) 127

Table 5.2. Procedural barriers by group (% mentions) 127

Table 5.3. Differences in Prioritised Success Factors for LDS 128

Table 5.4. Compelling quotes (selected) 136

One of the greatest strengths of this book is its strong theoretical grounding across multiple levels of analysis. The authors have conducted a broad review of the literature, taking into account both classical concepts of sustainable development and the latest theoretical approaches.

Due to its systematic presentation of analytical frameworks and its careful discussion of empirical results, the book may serve as a useful didactic resource in advanced academic courses on territorial development, local governance or development planning.

The book also successfully bridges the gap between academic research and policy practice, offering both a conceptual toolkit for analysis and a valuable resource for informed decision-making in the field of rural development.

Iwona Szczepaniak, Assoc. Prof.
Institute of Agricultural and Food Economics – National Research Institute



ISBN 978-83-68091-86-1