

INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT ENHANCEMENT IN
SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN POST-COMMUNIST POLAND

BY

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ABSTRACT

The question of tourism in post-communist transition has been one of the key concerns of policymakers in Central and Eastern Europe. The opening of Polish society to Western influences about three decades ago and the subsequent reforms caused a deep socio-economic crisis in the country. Whereas, on the one hand the negative consequences of this socio-economic transition have been the strongest in rural communities, on the other hand opening Poland's economy to influences from the West has re-vitalized rural travel. Poland has become a popular destination for visitors to post-communist Europe. Interest in traveling to rural areas creates multiple opportunities to diversify rural economy through the development of sustainable tourism.

Poland has been changing its tourism policy, turning away from the centralized tourism planning and instead turning toward distributing responsibilities for regional and local development to relevant authorities. The study explores social and political aspects of participatory tourism development in a post-communist setting. The important task of this work is to demonstrate how tourism decision-making could encourage the practice of local democracy through empowering individual stakeholders and communities in Pomerania, Poland.

The unique post-communist context provided the opportunity to integrate knowledge from different disciplines and to go beyond a single perspective in order to develop a more sophisticated understanding of decision-making in Poland. Therefore for this study, the views of local stakeholders became critical to understanding the community processes and perceived individual empowerment within a community field. Recent developments of rural sustainable tourism on post-communist societies will most likely lead to an increase in a number of studies focused on interactions and patterns of relationships in rural areas.

**To
Ryszard (Father), Natalia (Mother), Celinka (Sister), Deja (Husband)
and
Rumpelek**

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1. CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

1.1. Tourism impacts

As a result of technological advancements and improvements in communication, tourism has become one of the most dynamically developing industries around the world in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. New inventions have made travel an affordable practice and, as a result, have massively increased the number of tourists who represent a broad spectrum of social classes. Tourism is expected further to expand as people are beginning to discover more and more new destinations (Mowforth & Munt, 1998).

Growing in numbers, tourists have turned the world's attention to tremendous effects the tourism industry has on the environment and the socio-cultural wellbeing of tourism destinations (Andereck & Vogt, 2000; OECD, 1994). An impressive volume of tourism research has focused on the economic (e.g.: Dwyer Forsyth, & Spurr, 2006; Elkin & Roberts, 1987) and social aspects of tourism development (e.g. Crompton, 1992; Haukeland, 1984; Pearce, 1995; King, Pizam, & Milman, 1993) as well as on environmental concerns (e.g. Blangy & Nielsen, 1993), each study trying to document consequences of tourism development for localities, regions, and nations.

Growth of tourism demand has led to tourism development becoming a new high priority goal for many countries. However, investments in the tourism industry did not necessarily include careful analysis of the costs and benefits of such development (Gunn & Var, 2002; Tosun & Jenkins, 1996). Governments have been prone to claim that 1) developing tourism in some areas would equally distribute economic benefits across the entire country and increase their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Alipour & Kilic, 2003, Tosun, 2000); 2) tourism facilitates creation of jobs; 3) improves the quality of life in rural areas (Tosun et al., 2003). Therefore,

tourism is viewed as one of the most important sources of economic and social wellbeing for residents in developing economies (Tosun et al., 2003; Alipour & Kilic, 2003).

The opening of Polish society to Western influences about three decades ago and the subsequent socio-economic reforms contributed to a deep crisis in the country. At one end of the spectrum, rural residents have expressed beliefs that the negative consequences of this socio-economic transition have been the strongest in rural communities. At other end of the spectrum, opening Poland's economy, among other Eastern and Central European countries, to influences from the West has re-vitalized travel within Europe. Poland has become a popular destination for visitors to post-communist Europe with a total of 12.5 million of tourists in 2010 (Tourism Institute, 2010). In this context the expansion of the European Union (EU) in May 2004 appears as a major event in the country's history.

The EU enlargement has been the major factor in shifting the development priorities in post-communist Poland during the last decade toward a more sustainable use of local resources (Hall et al., 2006). Sustainable tourism has been recognized as an important sector providing employment opportunities, especially in the less developed peripheral and rural regions (Hall et al., 2006; Hegarty & Przeborska, 2005). In this regard tourism is expected greatly to contribute to the revitalization of rural areas in Poland by offering them a 'natural development path' (Hegarty & Przeborska, 2005). Both local authorities and rural stakeholders have viewed the development of rural tourism as a promising diversification strategy for rural economies and as an easily available means for agricultural households to achieve independence from the less profitable agriculture.

During the past decade the number of sustainable tourism initiatives in post-communist Poland has been growing as the Polish Government adopted the National Sustainable

Development Strategy in 2000 (<http://www.sd-network.eu>). The concept has not yet received relevant attention from tourism scholars and more studies are needed that explore impacts of rural tourism on the social and political wellbeing of post-communist destinations

1.1.1. Setting

Pomerania is a low-lying historical region in the mid-north part of Poland that features more than 1,500 lakes. Pomerania was strongly affected by the post–World War I and II border and population shifts. With more than two-thirds of the region's population residing in urban areas, the majority of residents lives in the three largest cities: Gdańsk, Gdynia, and Sopot. These cities are known as the Tri-city conurbation.



Figure 1 Map of Poland

The tourism potential of rural Pomerania comes mainly from the unique natural landscapes and cultural attributes of the Land of the Kashubs (Golembki, 2002). The Kashubs, the most distinct ethnic Slavic group, occupy areas located southwest of the Tri-city. The group cultivates a number of traditional elements of their unique folk culture and group members continue to speak the Kashubian language.

The unique combination of natural and cultural tourism attractions makes the region a popular destination for international and domestic visitors. After a decrease in the number of international visitors in 2002, the area has experienced an increase in inbound travels (in 2005, about 900 000 international tourists visited Pomerania compared to 680 000 in 2003) (Tourisms Institute, 2008). The number of international visitors has continued to grow till 2008 (Tourisms Institute, 2008). This transformation of the meant fewer citizens involved in agricultural production and instead many of them engaged, if possible, in other economic activities. Whereas the economic wellbeing of 25% of rural population depends upon agriculture, rural tourism has become an alternative source of income for those households (<http://www.agroturystyka.endi.pl>).

For a long time the Baltic coastline has been the most popular tourism area of Pomerania (Palich & Mysiak, 2003). Therefore, it is not surprising that higher concentration of tourism infrastructure occurred in the coastal regions whereas other rural areas have remained less developed. One simple but striking explanation is that visitors to the Baltic coast were unaware of the opportunities to visit the attractions inside the Kashuby Land that offers a unique natural and cultural experience. Only recently have the rural regions of Pomerania gained attention as potential tourist destinations (Mysiak, 2007). Mysiak's (2007) research demonstrates that the majority of visitors to Pomerania stay in rural households about three days and they usually come from large cities of central (31,6%) and southern (26%) Poland. Also, after the holiday season, a significant number of visitors come from the Tri-city (21,6%) (Mysiak, 2007).

There is a growing number of households that promote rural tourism in Pomerania (Polish Tourism Institute, 2004). Whereas accommodation for tourists in the rural areas of Pomerania has doubled since 1998, still the hospitality sector has not developed to its full

potential (Mysiak, 2007). Many of rural destinations continue to work on rural tourism development plans.

1.1.2. Rural tourism

Tourists appear to be attracted by peripheral or rural landscapes that they believe reflect values contrasting those represented by modernity such as economic growth and technological advancement (Crouch & McCabe, 2003; Hall et al., 2003). Peripheral areas are associated with more traditional ways of life (Urry, 2002).

George et al. (2009) propose that travel to rural areas has become a form of ‘escapism’ from globalization. Currently, small towns and remote rural localities are becoming significant tourism destinations for city dwellers. The increasing appreciation of local travel is also a consequence of broader social forces such as an increase in average income and the number of available vacation days. Other important factors are the yet-debatable consequences of the global economic financial crises.

Increased interest in travel to rural areas provides an opportunity for new destinations to diversify their local economies through tourism development. However, localities that have no aspiration to become future tourist destinations may be forced to adjust to this growing demand. Successfully adapting to a changing reality and achieving sustainability requires an interactive and inclusive process of tourism planning rather than a top-down decision-making (Dwyer et al., 2006).

1.1.3. Participatory tourism planning

Primary decision-makers in Poland have usually recognized the complexity of tourism development process; however, the country continues to face a number of obstacles that must be acknowledged and overcome (Marciszewska, 2006). The accession to the EU represented an

extension of the ongoing process of political and economic transition and social change (Smith & Hall, 2006). Regional and local tourism development strategies became central to decisions regarding tourism development (Marciszewska, 2006).

The EU has had significant impact on how local development strategies are conducted (McDonald et al., 2003). A growing need for structural changes in rural areas and more local tourism initiatives (Butowski, 2004) has resulted in the development of a comprehensive system of organizations that provide a framework for institutional collaboration (Marciszewska, 2006). Simultaneously Poland is changing its tourism policy, turning away from the centralized planning and instead turning toward distributing responsibilities for regional and local development to relevant authorities.

Participatory tourism decision-making has recently become a noticeable area of research interests (Parkins & Mitchell, 2005). The need for participatory approach has been emphasized within the framework of 'community based' or 'community driven' tourism development (Tosun, 1998; Saarinen, 2006) and management (Armitage, 2005). This perspective advocates the distribution of power to direct users of local resources and stakeholders' participation in decision-making (Zanetell & Knuth, 2002).

Novel participatory approaches to tourism planning have arisen from the recognition of the need for sustainability. Sustainable tourism is able to generate long-term social and economic benefits without causing significant damage to the natural and social environments (UNWTO, 1994). Yet, Murphy (1985, 1988) adds that the process of tourism planning must happen at the local level so that it can involve local tourism stakeholders. Being part of the planning increases the stakeholders' knowledge as well as it would improve cooperation. Moreover, local

population would know information important to developing and maintaining local sustainability. Input from local stakeholders is necessary because tourism affects them directly.

Both scholars and practitioners have believed that better approaches to stakeholders' participation in decision-making are needed to revitalize rural areas (Nash et al., 2006). The EU responded by creating the LEADER development framework. It promoted sustainable development through stakeholders' participation, and thereby it facilitated changes in rural development decision-making. The framework has been adopted in Poland.

The participatory approaches benefit emerging destination (Sofield, 2003). In rural Poland, participatory tourism development show potential to advance the practice of democratic decision-making by empowering concerned stakeholders in decision-making. Whereas participatory approaches to decision-making may lead to the empowerment of tourism stakeholders (Kroecker, 1995), they have become an important framework for community democratic practices (Etzioni, 2000).

1.2. Research question

The study explores social and political aspects of participatory tourism development in a post-communist setting. The unique context provides the opportunity to integrate knowledge from different disciplines and to go beyond a single perspective in order to develop a more sophisticated understanding of decision-making in Poland. Whereas the study balances on the border between the sustainable tourism development discourse, rural sociology, and community studies, it is also influenced by social constructivism.

The normative ideal that leads this research is that of local democracy where participatory decision-making enables the actors to communicate across limitations of time and space. In this context decision-making process concerned with local or regional wellbeing should

increase participants tolerance toward social differences as well as facilitate their self-development and self-determination (Young, 2000). Firstly, tourism planning in Pomerania that happens within the EU development framework appears to be concerned with the wellbeing of a tourism destination. Secondly, due to its participatory character, it is expected to increase empowerment of tourism stakeholders. Consequently, the important task of this work is to demonstrate how tourism decision-making could encourage the practice of local democracy through empowering individual stakeholders and communities. In order to do so, a brief description of the core concepts in the context of tourism decision-making in post-communist Pomerania is necessary.

1.2.1. Terminology

In Pomerania, ‘the difference’ between the urban and non-urban landscape continues to be the main advantage of rural tourism. According to UNWTO (2001) *tourism* “comprises the activities of persons traveling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes not related to the exercise of an activity remunerated from within the place visited” (p.13). Scholars agree that *tourism* involves displacement outside the ‘usual environment’, and a precise definition of the term is difficult and practical implications of the proposed definition differ among countries (Govers et al., 2008). An individual can decide whether they traveled to environment unlike their usual one. Displacement from the modern city to an area of rural landscapes, even if short distance, involves a change of ‘usual environment’.

The study explores the empowerment at individual and community levels within tourism development in Pomerania. It addresses the concepts of social capital, empowerment and interactional community fields in the post-communist context of rural tourism decision-making.

Social capital is understood as resources embedded in relationships between individuals. By developing relationships stakeholders have better access to resources such as knowledge or current information. Resources that become available as a result of relationships among tourism stakeholders may include for example availability of information and greater access to funding for tourism development actions. Stakeholders increase their social capital by entering multiple relationships or by improving the quality of the relationships that they already developed (Putnam, 1999). While examining social capital in Pomerania's rural participatory tourism planning, this study looks for consistent patterns of increased access to resources embedded in relationships between stakeholders who participate in the planning process.

Individual empowerment is understood as a multi- dimensional process that increases people's perception of control over their lives and environment. Empowerment derives from increased perceived access to local resources and perceived control over those resources. Local interaction and development of new relationships may empower stakeholders who participate in local social structures. At the individual level, empowerment manifests itself in socio-political control, critical understanding of social and political systems, and a proactive approach to solving personal and social problems (Zimmerman, 1995). The awareness of available resources and other factors that are likely to impact goal-oriented efforts are central to a belief that common goals can be achieved (Zimmerman, 1995).

Given that the study seeks to examine the empowerment in participatory rural tourism planning, it anticipates that the participatory approach empowers tourism stakeholders in Pomerania due to resources embedded in social relationships. Hence, social relations are means of empowerment. However, as many stakeholders still remain unaware of the social and political impacts of tourism decision-making, this study defines these effects as *latent functions* of the

participatory approach to tourism development. Unintended consequences of a social process may either enhance adaptation of a social unit or lessen its adjustment (Merton, 1968).

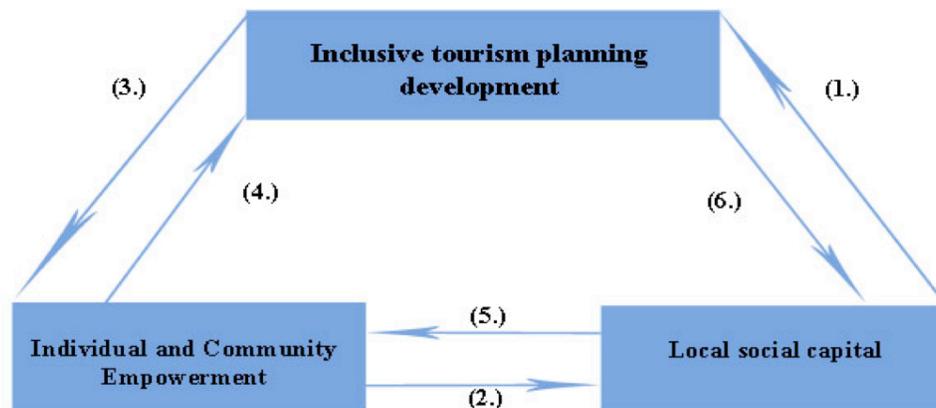
Interactional community field is a “ process of interactions through time with direction toward some more or less distinctive outcomes and with constantly changing elements and structure” (Wilkinson, 1770). A community field emerges in the process of interaction between stakeholders from local *social fields* (Kaufman, 1959). A *community field* differs from a social field in that it mediates a range of interests in a locality-oriented action (Kaufman, 1959, p.10). By definition, a community field is focused on the betterment of stakeholders life. This study seeks to explore the character of interactional communities that emerged in Pomerania. Recently, more researchers, organizers, politicians and employers recognize that individual change is a prerequisite for community and empowerment (Wilson, 1996). Along with this line of scholars I postulate that interactional communities in the post communist setting of rural Pomerania manifest empowerment within rural societies at the community level. It is implied that interactional rural communities emerge as rural tourism stakeholders become empowered in local social fields.

By examining the above listed points of concern, the research evaluates the tourism decision-making process in rural Pomerania implemented within the current EU tourism development framework. Given that more frequent and higher quality relationships between stakeholders should lead to better communication and cooperation between them, they lead to increased capacity of rural societies to act toward common goals. As much as the empowerment of tourism stakeholders is crucial for the quality of participatory tourism development, also stakeholders who participate in tourism decision-making are more likely to feel increased control over their environment. This work should initiate a broader discussion that regards current

tourism actions and participatory tourism decision-making as a means to improve local democratic practice. The proposed conceptual model (Figure 1) should be regarded as conceptual framework that serves as a guide through the analysis of empowerment in participatory tourism development in Pomerania.

1.2.2. The conceptual model

Tourism developments affect the quality of local life by influencing economic and social conditions of a destination. Participatory tourism development projects are likely to impact the character and frequency of social interactions among tourism stakeholders and thereby change the character of relationships across them. Figure 1 illustrates how individual and community empowerment as well as social relationships reinforce each other in the context of the participatory approach to tourism development. As the study considers stakeholders' empowerment to be a crucial element of democratic local processes in Pomerania, the model provides a conceptual framework for more detailed examination included in the following chapters.



- (1.) High levels of local social capital enhance the quality of inclusive tourism planning & development
- (2.) Inclusive tourism planning & development improve the quality of local social capital
- (3.) Inclusive tourism planning & development provide legal framework for individual & community empowerment
- (4.) Individual & community empowerment increases the quality of inclusive tourism planning & development
- (5.) Local social capital facilitates individual & community empowerment
- (6.) Inclusive tourism planning & development motivate stakeholders to invest in local social capital

Figure 2 Advancing local democratic cultures through individual and community empowerment

Inclusive process of tourism development may empower stakeholders by influencing their perception of local conditions and their understanding of the development process. Also, tourism action facilitates social relationships and enhances the distribution of social capital. I adopted qualitative techniques to investigate the study's research problems. Semi-structured interviews increased my knowledge about relations among participatory (inclusive) tourism planning, individual and community empowerment as well as quality and density of social relationships in post-communist rural Pomerania.

The study is influenced by elements of social constructivism. My personal experiences during interviews and the perceptions of stakeholders and overall context were important factors that impacted my interpretation of the interviews' transcripts and other examined documents. Whereas I intent to demonstrate the stakeholders' subjective understanding of participatory tourism development process that is present among local stakeholders and how they view their ability to control the outcomes of tourism decision-making, I am unable to isolate my personal beliefs and impressions about the quality of decision-making in Pomerania. Brief examination of personal factors I provide in the *METHODS* chapter will help a reader to elucidate valuable findings of empowerment in participatory decision-making.

1.3. Organization of the work

The goal of the theoretical section is to adopt and apply the available theories to discuss relations presented in the conceptual model (Figure 1). First, based on the available scholarly work I seek to link interactional community field with individual and community empowerment in the context of participatory tourism decision-making. I propose that participatory tourism development can empower rural society at community and individual levels. I draw attention to

environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable tourism development as a tool to empower rural stakeholders in the CEE countries (Countries of Central and Eastern Europe).

A discussion of the local tourism development efforts (LEADER) and Local Action Groups in Pomerania follows the theoretical chapters. I demonstrate that Local Action Groups, which coordinate participatory tourism planning in many rural areas of Pomerania, show a potential to have positive impact on rural societies. The presentation of findings is organized according to the main points of concerns demonstrated in the first chapter. Such organization aims at illustrating the process of relationship building and empowerment in tourism planning in the unique context of rural Pomerania. Conclusions regarding the contribution of this study complete this work.

Local processes are complex and difficult to demonstrate as they involve economic, social, and political interactions (Wilkinson, 1991). Tourism development further complicates the interplay among forces shaping local reality. To explore the effects of tourism development, and in particular participatory tourism decision-making, this study incorporates the three main concepts: inclusive/participatory tourism development, interactional community field, and empowerment at individual and community levels. The terms social capital and latent function are used to describe the social effects of inclusive tourism development on rural society. The introduction provided only a simplistic picture of the conceptual model that illustrated local processes. The following chapter provides a more detailed picture of the proposed conceptual framework.

2. CHAPTER II: THE ROLE OF DEVELOPING SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS IN EMPOWERMENT AT THE INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY LEVEL

Taking into account the common principles of sustainable tourism, participatory tourism development refers to empowering local stakeholders to determine their own goals for development (Timothy, 1999). Individual empowerment happens through social relationships leading to greater access to resources. Empowered stakeholders may also foster community action and thereby empowerment contributes to higher quality local democratic practices (Perkins et al., 2002). Individual change becomes a bridge to connect community members (Wilson, 1996). Throughout the chapter, the reader will come to realize that within a participatory tourism framework the character of stakeholders' empowerment impacts the character of the interactional community field. Furthermore, the chapter addresses the issue of integrating different local interests under the theme of sustainable development framework.

Stakeholders' empowerment and formation of interactional communities in tourism decision-making have not yet earned relevant attention among tourism scholars (Sofield, 2003). Therefore, in this chapter I seek to develop a framework that will be relevant to examine empowerment in a post-communist setting within participatory tourism development. I discuss relevant literature examining concepts of interactional community, empowerment and social capital in the context of democratic consolidation.

The chapter consists of five separated yet intertwined sections. The first section builds the context of the study: the role of collective farms and the membership in the European Union are discussed in light of the current state of participatory development and local democratic practices. Further sections review the concepts of, interactional community field and social

capital. Finally, I review the concept of participatory tourism and discuss it in the context of empowerment at individual and community levels. .

2.1. Past and present: the study context

Over the past two decades, the citizens of post-communist Eastern Europe experienced tremendous economic and political changes (Howard, 2003). The major event, after which the official post-communist transition began, was the collapse of the Communist regime in Poland. Economic reforms focused on the liberalization of the market system and political changes concentrated on the development of democratic culture nationwide (Grabowska & Szawiel, 2001). Under these circumstances, the establishment of relatively smoothly functioning political institutions was a significant step to strengthen the support for the new political and economic order (Bandelj & Radu, 2006). Considering the subject matter of this study, I discuss political and economic factors that directly relate to empowerment in participatory tourism decision-making in rural Poland. One of the most important long-term events that influenced the current post-communist dynamics in rural Poland was dominance of collective farming as a form of agricultural activity in the country.

2.1.1. The role of collective farms (PGRs)

The creation of collective farms immediately followed World War II. The workers of collective farms, in particular, in the territories regained after the war were mostly displaced people from post war USSR territories (Kasprzak, 2004). Collective farm workers were poor and had different traditions and customs. The process of integration was difficult (Sakson 1997, p.168 in Kasprzak, 2004)

The central role of the farm institution in the life of the family and a high number of children became distinguishing features of collective farms in Poland. The staff of the farm,

together with their families, created a unique rural community. A typical village in the collective farming system was located far from other villages or cities and constituted a self-sufficient micro world (Gałęski, 1966, p. 89).

The whole life of a PGR worker was linked to the farm institution (Jagiello-Lysiowa, 1969, p. 55). The institution provided accommodation, stores and schools. It supported its workers in various ways. Such protective environment led to a unique mentality in the collective farm communities defined by some scholars as a *syndrome*. The phenomenon was described as: a passive attitude, claiming attitude or a skilled helplessness (Kasprzak, 2004). Conditions offered by the collective farming system involved a form of dependence that could not be compensated with money (Poniatowski 1966, p.121 in Kasprzak, 2004).

The mentality of a worker of a collective farm was compared to a phenomenon Florian Zaniecki observed and described seventy years ago. Zaniecki studied a group of rural workers in big private farms in Poland. He described a typical farmer as uneducated, poor but also aware of his low social status. A helpless worker is not enterprising and is used to being told what to do and usually seeks a master-protector. Scholars noted similarities between the mentality of a collective farm worker and a proletarian from Zaniecki's study (Kasprzak, 2005). These similarities include: the central role of a protector, material motivation to work, and receiving a part of payment in goods, not money. More recent studies have shown that the shutting down of collective farms has not only been a problem for the workers, but also for the whole social structure (Tarkowska & Korzeniewska, 2002). Unemployment, poverty, and a low level of education among the workers in many cases led to marginalization of these rural communities.

2.1.2. The role of the European Union

After the collapse of the communist system and the closure of collective farms, actions of the post-communist governments in Poland have reflected the popular 'Western' belief that economic growth relies heavily on the quality of democratic processes. The country has struggled simultaneously to build strong capitalist markets and develop democratic political systems. European Union has been one of the two most important external influences on the democratic consolidation process in Central Eastern Europe (Sandford, 1999). Since 1990, the EU has become an active agent of political transition through mechanisms such as aid and loan programs (Steves, 2001). The perspective of EU membership increased pressure to strengthen democratic values and enhance democratic culture in post-socialist localities (Nederveen, 2001).

The criteria for membership include democracy, free market economy, human and minority rights, and political stability (Horspool, 2003). Schimmelfennig et al. (2006) note that these principles were later reaffirmed in the Copenhagen criteria of enlargement agreed on at the European Council of June 1993. Entering the path of these ideological changes and successful creation of necessary political and economic environment culminated in Poland's accession in 2004.

Stakeholders' involvement in socio-political processes and struggling for deliberation has become a central component of the new local dynamics (CEC, 2004). Deliberation is understood as "a cognitive process in which individuals form, alter, or reinforce their opinions as they weigh evidence and arguments from various points of view" (Lindeman, 2002, p. 199). European local societies are the main stakeholder to determine local development (Mularska, 2008). They have the greatest potential to meet locally expressed needs and to pursue residents' interest (Benhabib, 1996).

A low level of citizen participation appears the major obstacle to vital local democratic cultures in rural Poland (Howard, 2002; Krzyzowski, 2008). In the post-communist societies, stakeholders have felt no need, for example, to participate in decision-making, despite being given opportunities to do so. However, empowered stakeholders who engage in local affairs are the essential component of the development model established in Western Europe. In particular, common feeling of disempowerment of post-communist rural societies decelerates democratic consolidation (Misher & Rose, 1997; Tucker et al., 2002; Dowley & Silver, 2002).

Scholars propose that distrust and resistance (Michalska, 2008; Mularska, 2008), the features of the phenomenon described as the post-communist *syndrome*, are a direct result of a long-lasting and oppressive rule of the Communist regime (Klicperova et al., 1997). A few scholars also point to ‘missing’ social capital as a factor constraining the advancement of democratic practices (e.g. Paldam & Svendsen, 2000; Rose, 1999). Others add that formal cooperative networks of relationships are poorly developed, and even diminishing (Reiser et al., 2001; Mihaylova, 2004).

Howard (2003) makes an important suggestion; namely, he argues that stakeholders can change their participatory habits by acquiring familiarity and comfort with new local processes (e.g. tourism development). Therefore, a mechanism that motivates rural stakeholders to participate in local decision-making is necessary (Howard, 2003). Michalska (2008) also suggests that the adaptation of additional tools is desired to alleviate the social consequences of the contemporary socio-economic changes, and to minimize any damages associated with the rapid transition of rural Poland (also in Mularska, 2008). In other words, some scholars believe that participation is more likely to increase with innovative policies to influence current and future developments in a locality.

One may presume that completing democratic consolidation requires empowered stakeholders that are engaged in local affairs. In the context of post-communist Poland, empowerment may happen through development of local social relationships among stakeholders (Krzyszowski, 2008), and increased knowledge and skills (Wierzbicki, 1975 in Mularska, 2008). Authorities need to engage with local societies and facilitate the development of social relationships by providing spaces for interaction and by creating multiple opportunities for participation in local affairs (Butler, 2005). Interactions within sustainable tourism development framework initiatives enhance communication among stakeholders, and tourism often becomes a means to their empowerment in other local affairs (Helling et al., 2005; Eguren, 2008).

2.2. Empowerment

Empowerment is the core concept of the proposed model. The concept is shared by many disciplines such as community development, psychology, education, and economics. Scholars have defined empowerment in a number of ways. Definitions of empowerment are inconsistent and they are confusing to younger scholars. Below, I review predominant approaches to the concept of empowerment. Also, I point out some of the most striking inconsistencies in defining the concept. Based on the views of others, I adopt definitions of empowerment at individual and community levels that appear the most relevant to the proposed research questions.

Researchers usually agree that empowerment links individual wellbeing with a larger environment (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). The construct usually connects individual characteristics with acts directed toward social change (Rappaport, 1981, 1984). On the one hand, for Cole (2006) empowerment means that individuals or groups have the “capacity ... to determine their own affairs”. Empowerment arises from processes that help people control

factors affecting their lives (Cole, 2006). On the other hand, Fawcett et al. (1994) refers to empowerment as a process in which stakeholders gain influence over events and outcomes that are important to them. Similarly, for Rappaport (1987) empowerment is a process “by which people, groups and communities gain mastery over issues of concern to them” (in Zimmerman, 1995). Empowerment is understood either as a process of acquiring control and the capability of successful action or as an outcome of the empowering processes understood as the actual ability of individual stakeholders and communities to act (Staples, 1990).

Stakeholders’ empowerment involves “group participation through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources” (Cornell Empowerment Group, 1989 in Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). Scholars usually distinguish between empowerment as a process and empowerment as an outcome. According to this view it is clearly a process that leads to greater control of resources by discriminated stakeholders.

This study follows the view that empowerment needs to be understood as a multilevel construct. Empowerment at the individual level should not be examined without considering existing interdependencies between empowerment at other levels (Zimmerman, 1995). At the individual level, empowering processes provide multiple opportunities for people to work with others, learn decision-making skills, and manage resources. Critically aware individuals are able to analyze what must change. They feel capable of acting upon the need and their acts reflect their individual values and interests (Miller & Campbell, 2006).

Empowerment in a group includes processes and structures that enhance members’ skills and provide them with the mutual support necessary to achieve organizational change (Zimmerman, 1995). As a result such group reflect changes of existing power structures. As a

result of empowering processes, group members meaningfully participate in the decision-making process (Kroeker, 1995). Stakeholders' empowerment in a group is closely related to democratic practice, in which members come together to discuss and evaluate their actions (Miller & Campbell, 2006). According to this view individual empowerment is a necessary step to group empowerment. On the other hand, group empowerment is understood as an outcome of the processes and structures that empower group members.

Empowerment at a community level can be regarded as somewhat analogous to group empowerment, as community "stakeholders work together in an organized fashion to improve their collective lives and links among community organizations and agencies that help to maintain the quality of life" (Zimmerman, 1995). Fawcett et al (1995) promote the view that community empowerment is a process in which community members, who share physical spaces, experiences and concerns, gain influence over conditions that matter to them (Fawcett et al., 1995). It remains unclear whether stakeholders individual empowerment happens before, simultaneously or after empowerment at the community level. This inconsistency is partially solved by Cole's (2006) observation that in empowerment at the community level, stakeholders become agents of change capable of solving problems they face while making decisions and capable of implementation of the proposed solutions. Empowerment at a community level involves stakeholders' individual capacity to pursue common goals in joint actions. The capacity to act collectively combines actors' individual characteristics with supportive culture to challenge current power relations (Cole, 2006). Stakeholders manifest individual empowerment through their capability of pursuing individual interests in a community field. Thus, it seems that theory implies that individual empowerment is a prerequisite to empowerment at community level. However, to feel empowered in local governance, actors need institutionalized

opportunities to influence development planning and decision-making. Only social infrastructure that is supportive of stakeholders' demands will make it possible to challenge local status quo (Butler, 2005).

2.2.1. Psychological empowerment

Empowerment at individual level is linked to a concept of psychological empowerment (PE) (Zimmerman, 1995). This section examines Zimmerman (1995) definition of PE, as well as it explores interdependencies between empowerment at individual and community levels from the perspective of interactional community field. Zimmerman (1995) notes that psychological empowerment (PE) “ manifests itself in different perceptions, skills, and behaviors across people; (b) different beliefs, competencies, and actions may be required to master various settings; and (c) PE may fluctuate over time ” (p.583).

Zimmerman (1995) distinguishes between empowering processes that create opportunities to control one's destiny and influence decisions and outcomes of empowerment. Processes that empower stakeholders engage them in learning about opportunities to influence elements of their environment (Zimmerman et al., 1992 in Zimmerman 1995). In principle, processes that empower stakeholders increase their ability to impact decision-making. One consequence of the empowering processes is increased perception of sociopolitical control: the extent to which individuals perceive themselves as having motivation and capacity to utilize social and political resources (Zimmerman & Zahniser, 1991). Actions that aim at increasing PE employ methods such as stakeholders' participation in local development projects and partnership building (Miller & Campbell, 2006). The quality of involvement is critical in achieving psychological empowerment (Kelly, 1988 in Zimmerman, 1995). PE is also largely determined by the context in which it occurs and therefore it varies across fields of local action

(Zimmerman, 1995). Given different contexts, exact methods to empower stakeholders must remain flexible.

The concept of psychological empowerment integrates two elements: a) perception of sociopolitical control and b) a critical understanding of individual and political systems with a proactive approach to solving personal and social problems (Zimmerman, 1995). Empowered stakeholders believe that they are able to achieve the desired outcomes. They are aware of the resources that are available and factors that influence their efforts (Zimmerman, 1995).

PE is always determined by a particular context, population and development period (Zimmerman, 1995). The three factors shape the following components of psychological empowerment: intrapersonal, interactional and behavioral (Zimmerman, 1995). The intrapersonal component refers to perceived control in a specific domain and motivation to exercise that control. Perceived competence and self-efficacy- a belief of having influence in a specific domain usually relate to specific domains of life. Such belief may lead to an individual initiative (Zimmerman, 1995).

The three components of psychological empowerment remain in constant interaction and thereby become mutual causes and consequences (Kroecker, 1995). Stakeholders may develop skills to pursue desired goals due to their engagement in decision-making (Zimmerman, 1995). They learn to interact effectively (e.g. leadership skills, problem solving) (Kieffer, 1984). The final, behavioral component is achieved in action directly aimed at desired outcomes.

Whereas psychological empowerment happens at the individual level, it is also linked to empowerment at the community level. Elements of both local and national environments can influence the character of empowering and outcome process (Kroecker, 1995). For example, powerful regional and national actors can either facilitate or impede empowerment. Given the

connection, Kieffer (1984) suggests that psychological empowerment is best achieved through collective action. His conclusion is however inconsistent with previous proposals that individual empowerment is a necessary prerequisite for empowerment at a community level. Both claims can be valid under certain circumstances. At times individual empowerment felt by some local stakeholders (leaders) leads to empowerment among others mainly through community action.

In this study empowerment involves *processes that lead to increased perceived control over one or more dimensions of stakeholders' lives*. Empowerment can simultaneously happen in different dimensions of stakeholders' lives represented by local social fields. It is "more than participation in decision-making and it includes the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to make decisions" (Rowlands, 1997, p.14). Empowered stakeholders successfully pursue their interests in local fields. Therefore community empowerment at the level happens when a group of individual stakeholders manifest capacity to act together through community field. For Wilson's (1996) view that more scholars, organizers, politicians and employers should recognize that empowerment of the core community stakeholders is a necessary prerequisite for community action (also: Speer & Hughey, 1995; Florin & Wandersman, 1990; Chavis & Wandersman, 1990).

2.3. Interactional Community

Community used to be defined as a geographic concept or a form of a collective interest revealed in common views on some issues (George et al., 2009). Four approaches to community dominate: the human ecological approach, the social system approach, the interactional approach and the critical approach. Also, the idea that communities are socially constructed is not new. The process of social construction is possible because people interact with each other.

Almost any application of ‘community’ usually accepts some level of interaction. For example Johnston et al (2000) see community as “a social network of interacting individuals usually concentrated into defined territory”. This study subscribes to the view that communities are “continuing processes through which their existence is reproduced” (Day, 2006, p. 156). Whereas community agency usually develops as a result of institutional actions, communities are brought into power by interpretive activities of their members (Day, 2006).

Wilkinson (1991) emphasizes that social interaction is necessary for community and its development. His elaborated theory of ‘interactional community field’ identifies a community on the basis of purposive interchanges among stakeholders (Wilkinson, 1991; Brennan et al., 2008). Community is defined as “a place-oriented process of interrelated actions through which members of a local population express a shared sense of identity while engaging in the common concerns of life” (Theodori, 2005, p.662-663).

Following Wilkinson (1991), and Theodori (2005), the study views a community as a dynamic interactional phenomenon. The interactional approach directs attention to a process of interaction instead of a place in which it occurs or outcome of interactions (Wilkinson 1974; 1991). Interactional community emerges from interactions between social fields such as education, environmental protection, government, and recreation within the context of local life in a local society (Wilkinson, 1991; Theodori, 2005). Participants in local social fields unite and act together, making a community field “a process of interaction through time, with direction toward some more or less distinctive outcome” (Wilkinson, 1970). Also, local purposive actions, such as tourism development, facilitate the emergence of a community field by connecting different social fields that meet the needs and realize the interest of involved stakeholders

(Brennan et al., 2008). This is so because actions that are carried out in an organized manner improve coordination among social fields (Theodori, 2005).

Principally, interactional community is not free of internal conflicts. Conflicts arise from a difference of interests among participants. They are indispensable components of the community field reflecting differences within a local society. Societal conflicts are manifested in the process of interaction (Brennan et al., 2008)

Wilkinson (1974) proposes that more frequent and intense interactions among social (interest) fields foster a development of relationships among participating stakeholders. Differences in the structure and the character of social interactions among stakeholders who make up interactional community fields introduce qualitative differences between social fields (Wilkinson, 1991). Also, a physical setting being a component of local context may either strengthen or weaken local interactions (Wilkinson, 1972, 1991). Sociocultural characteristics and physical resources are essential parts of a setting as they co-define the character of local interactions. An example of settings that limited local interaction were areas where collective farming dominated rural activities. Institutional arrangements during the soviet period and the beginning of the transition aimed explicitly at interrupting goal-driven interactions among rural stakeholders. Although Matarrita-Cascante et al. (2010) suggest that a ‘setting’ “serves only as the backdrop for local life and reveal[s] little about the motivations and ability of local people to come together to act”. Many features of a post-communist setting have been significant constraints to community development through its empowerment in Pomerania. By contrast, current institutional arrangements facilitate interactions among local stakeholders. The new EU development framework LEADER is one example of how current development policies, that

compose a local setting, shape local context and facilitate interactions among rural stakeholders by providing funding for cooperative development projects and community focused action.

Community field engages in action focused on a locality (Wilkinson, 1974). Interacting stakeholders view themselves in the context of their respective roles in the community and they interact in accordance with their individual perceptions of the purpose that brought them together. Whereas it is true that individuals are more likely to pursue interaction if they perceive it to be beneficial, interactions sometimes happen despite the stakeholders' willingness to interact. Both processes, however, shape stakeholders' behaviors, as they respond to the stimuli occurring during interactions (Mead, 1934, Wilkinson, 1991).

One important assumption made while looking for interactional communities is that individuals living in a locality tend to interact with one another despite the fact that they may engage in relations with stakeholders outside their locality (Wilkinson, 1991; Brown & Swanson, 2003). In this view, the process of local interaction is the most important empirical manifestation of the local society (Wilkinson, 1991). Increasing the quality and frequency of interaction improves the quality of local society's life as it facilitates the development of a community.

2.3.1. Community development –social relationships

Wilkinson (1991) articulates that community development is a “ process of community change, [in which] ecological, organizational, situational and other forces converge to structure and alter the relationship among people in a local setting, and random events also bring turbulence to the local arena” (p.92). In community development stakeholders act together and link with others to realize their common interest. In result the enduring patterns of relationships among social fields may emerge as a community field (Wilkinson, 1991). Social relationships foster communication and flow of information among participating actors and across social fields

(Brennan et al., 2008). One should note that not all kinds of relationships are equally beneficial for an interactional community field or its participants. To clarify the differences between more beneficial and less-beneficial relationships the following sections introduce the concept of social capital and how it relates to interactional community and local tourism development, while at the same time indicating the qualitative difference between its different forms.

2.4. Social capital

Social capital is a concept that has gained a great deal of interest within the fields of economics, education, and sociology but the specific criteria to define it remain unclear. For its famous advocates such as Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988) and more recently, Putnam (1993, 2000), social capital is critical for good local governance. Scholars tend to agree that access to social capital facilitates many important political and economic phenomena (e.g. Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1993, 2000; Johanesson et al., 2003). For example Putnam (2002) suggests that a high level of social capital advances local democratic practices. Hence, the relevance of social capital with regards to transitioning economies, previously under political and economic influences of the Soviet Union, is hardly questionable.

In this study social capital is understood as resources embedded in relationships among community stakeholders. The understanding of social capital as accessible resources embedded in relationships among stakeholders implies that it contributes to empowerment at individual and community levels. Ways in which social capital facilitates individual and community empowerment are further discussed below. However, in order to understand the ways social capital embedded in relationships among rural stakeholders impacts social and political outcomes, first I attempt to resolve the conceptual difficulties associated with the concept.

In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam (2000) has argued the importance of social capital in civil society from the perspectives of sociology and political science. Coleman (1988) adopts the economic and educational views on the role of social capital in a society. He argued that social capital offer the possibility of achievements that in its absence would not be possible. Both would agree that when a group engages in decision-making, then group members become familiar with one another (sociability). Stakeholders access to resources through interactions and relationships with each other and local officials (Putnam, 1993). The development of social relationships among the group members (Coleman, 1988) promotes their greater civic engagement (Putnam, 2000) and increases groups' inner ability of action (Coleman, 1988).

Also I see the need to bring to attention the fact that not all networks of relationships show the potential to advance democratic decision-making. Some social relationships may lead to disengagement and may not benefit the community. However, this review of theoretical concepts engages mainly in linking social capital to empowerment at individual and community levels interaction. Therefore, I mainly discuss the aspects that relate to empowerment and democratic virtues such as relationship building and community action.

2.4.1. Stakeholders' social capital

Putnam (2000) regards social relations and resources embedded in those relations a source of strength for a society. He recognizes that a common theme revolves around the features of social life that enable participants to act together more effectively (Putnam, 1993, 2000). Guenther and Falk (2000) add that developing ties among local stakeholders facilitates the development of trust and thereby improves their cooperation.

Putnam's (2000) core idea is that social relationships have value and they affect the productivity of individuals and groups. Putnam (2000) calls attention to the fact that civic virtues

are most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocity among stakeholders. Bourdieu (1986), on the other hand, looks at social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources linked to the possession of durable networks of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (p. 249). Social capital is a desirable attribute of stakeholders engaged in interactions (Wall et al., 1998). By developing ties stakeholders gain the opportunity to benefit because of increased access to resources. As stakeholders become involved in various groups, these relationships have additional effects on the wider community; in other words, personal relationships impact the quality of the community.

Coleman (1988) further argues that social capital includes elements that “consist of some aspect of social structure and they facilitate certain actions of actors (individual or group actors) within that structure” (p.159). Coleman sees social capital as "a largely unintentional” by-product of other processes, (Schuller et al., 2000, p. 7). On the one hand institutional infrastructure that facilitates local actions increase one’s social capital. On the other hand these actions support social relationships and access to resources embedded in those relationships.

Putnam (2000) proposes that individuals can chose to posses some forms of social capital, while they acquire other forms by necessity. He distinguishes between bridging (inclusive) and bonding (exclusive) social capital. Outward looking forms of social capital usually bridge stakeholders across their differences (Putnam, 2000). Bridging connections more easily link stakeholders to external assets and thereby facilitate diffusion of information. Bridging relationships also lead to increased tolerance and acceptance of otherness, which are foundations of ‘civic virtues’ (Putnam, 2000). Such ties can generate broader identities and reciprocity. On the other end of the spectrum, ties among stakeholders who are alike create in-

group loyalty, but they can also create intolerance and antagonism toward non-members (Putnam, 2000).

This study views a social relationship as a combination of bridging and bonding qualities. For example if bonding qualities dominate a relationship among stakeholders, they may express antagonistic behavior toward other actors based on perceived differences. However, where bridging qualities dominate a relationship among stakeholders, they may be more open toward other actors who demonstrate some differences. Therefore, bonding ties may be viewed as less valuable in generating democratic virtues because they don't force stakeholders to communicate across differences in action focused on activities aiming beyond private interests (Putnam, 2000; Hooghe & Stolle, 2003; Howard, 2002).

In conclusion, neither connections within groups nor connections across groups should be neglected (Perkins et al., 2002). However, local actions embracing entire area, such as participatory tourism development, facilitate mainly the development of relationships among stakeholders across different local social groups. These tourism related relationships enable the stakeholders to get together and cooperate at a community level, and therefore become the strength of local societies.

2.4.2. Community level social capital

Social capital can be an attribute of individuals as well as it can be an attribute of groups and communities (Baron et al., 2000). Studies show that high levels of social capital have the potential to foster community action (Wall et al., 1998). Putnam (2000) laments that the importance of collective efforts is often neglected and underappreciated. Given that social capital is about resources to which individuals gain access through entering into new relationships. two ideal types of local actors prevail in a local society: those who connect with others in order to

gain access to social capital and those who possess social capital and distribute it to other actors by establishing social relationships with them.

From the perspective of interactional community field theory, stakeholders would develop social relationships across different social fields due to interactions between the fields (Wilkinson, 1991). However, social relationships developed within a social field may become a catalyst for a stakeholder's leadership within this field and participation in a community field (Perkins et al., 2002). Building relationships between unlike actors guarantees increased access to resources such as information and new knowledge (Perkins et al., 2002). Therefore, bridging social relationships in rural communities of Pomerania deserve greater consideration in this study.

At the community level, social capital is a function of stakeholders' behaviors and social fields of interest involved in a community field. A community asserts that it possesses a certain level of social capital by pursuing joint action with interest in the locality wellbeing (Wall, et al., 1998). Stakeholders continuously re-establish their roles in the community process (e.g. tourism development). Interests of represented social fields that were given priority may be replaced by more general goals contributing to the wellness of rural society. Social relationships among stakeholders who pursue specific objectives of their social fields evolve as the stakeholders become aware of common interests in the community. Expectations of individuals who benefit from a developing social relationships no longer serve as the primary motivation for actors to pursue interaction. Social interactions stakeholders strongly identify with the local society and connect individual benefits with benefits occurring to the society due to local action (Kay, 2005). Trust develops as a function of relationships between them and it further facilitates the development of a shared set of values (Putnam, 2002). Realizing common goals, participants act

as a community (Putnam, 1993; Woolcock & Natayan, 2000). The following section links individual and community social capital to individual and community empowerment.

2.4.3. Social capital and empowerment

Wall et al. (1998) suggest that actions that focus on generating social capital also enhance local collective actions. Members of societies with higher levels of social capital demonstrate higher levels of participation, and stakeholders in such societies will be more likely to cooperate (Putnam, 2000). Also, those local societies are more likely to engage in activities designed by local governments to involve residents in decision-making (Potetee, 2003).

Perkins et al. (2002) developed a framework where empowerment, understood as collective efficacy, is an important component of social capital. The authors argue that linking social capital with empowerment is natural since it focuses on how self-efficacy and confidence relate to bridging via participation at group and organization levels as well as focusing on how they relate to the exchange and acquisition of resources and social change at the community level (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Perkins et al., 2002).

2.4.3.1. Individual social capital and empowerment

Perkins and Zimmerman (1995) note that the ideology of empowerment has been widely applied at the regional and national policy levels. At the local level, it is a natural to link it with social capital (Perkins et al., 2002). Coleman (1988, 1990) proposes that relationships that stakeholders develop as a result of interactions facilitate achievement of their goals and increases stakeholders' ability to influence social environment. By entering into relationships within a social field they increase chances that they will accomplish earlier identified goals. Participation in local social fields and in particular the development of relationships among stakeholders within a social field are processes that empower stakeholders (Perkins et al., 2002). Furthermore,

the more actors join a social field, the greater its capacity to act toward participants' interest by employing their collective and personal resources. This also leads to empowerment at the field level. Only empowered representatives of local fields can meaningfully participate in community action (Wilkinson, 1972).

Scholars suggest that direct participation in decision-making is a significant condition for individual empowerment (e.g. Pratchett et al., 2009; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988). Others add that also non-direct forms of participation in decision-making can empower stakeholders (Li, 2006; Pratchett et al., 2009). Lin (2002) rightly emphasizes the danger posed by the fact that access to empowering forms of social capital is determined by "structural assets," embedded either in collective (e.g., an intervention program or a community), or in dyadic relations. In these circumstances access to empowering forms of social capital arising from developing relations can be difficult for stakeholders excluded from the local fields. Limited participation may be either enforced or a voluntary decision of disinterested stakeholders.

2.4.3.2. Empowered interactional community and social capital

Stewart-Weeks and Richardson (1998) point out that the high quality of social relationships formed among stakeholders increases the community's capacity to address and resolve problems. The concept of empowerment at the community level implies that stakeholders who interact and maintain social relationships are capable of influencing decision-making (Putnam, 2000). Allen et al. (2004) rightly suggest that a local society always includes stakeholders who express more interest in joint actions and who foster society's cohesiveness. These stakeholders usually mobilize others and they exert positive influence on the development of local social relationships within a locality (Allen et al., 2004).

In the post-communist setting empowerment of interactional community (for example empowerment in tourism development) requires additional actions from local institutions that facilitate knowledge and skills in order to foster future cooperation (Helling et al., 2005). Scholars agree that meaningful participation in decision-making is a means to achieve community empowerment (Cole, 2006) and later community development (Eguren, 2008). Participatory approaches to tourism development generate stakeholders' cooperation across social fields by enhancing their learning and the understanding of the local social system (Hung et al., 2011; Zimmerman, 1995). Participating stakeholders may recognize benefits in pursuing shared interests as a group, and capacity for collective action is created in pursuit of shared goals instead of competing for local resources (Putnam, 1993)

Wilkinson's (1991) perspective on community leads to the understanding that an interactional community field is itself evidence that empowerment is happening at the community level. For Robert Putnam (1993) "people learn to trust one another through face to face interaction in associations and informal social networks; norms of trust and reciprocity spill over into society at large" (p.67). From this perspective local interactions that lead to relationships among stakeholders and their commitment are the foundation of empowerment at the community level (Aigner et al., 2002).

Stakeholders' cooperation in interactional community action and the promotion of the wellbeing of a locality advance democratic practices in post-communist setting. Also, institutional arrangements that support democratic practices during the development process are critical for stakeholders' participation in decision-making (Meppen, 2000; Perkins, 1995; Knopp & Caldbeck, 1990). Stakeholders acquire familiarity and comfort with changing political and social environments and they can more actively shape their environment (Howard, 2003). New

practices of democratic decision-making are significantly advanced if residents feel confident to perform locally oriented action. The following section demonstrates how such confidence and a feeling of competence arise in participatory tourism development.

2.5. Participatory Tourism Development

Local participation has been a concept of increasing importance since Brundtland Report in 1987 defined it as an indispensable ingredient of sustainable development. Murphy (1985) as one of its most active supporters, stresses that participatory development focuses on identification of host community's goals and needs regarding tourism. Tourism stakeholders' participation in 'real-world' decision making allows them to observe more closely and better to evaluate current governance. Dialogue and cooperation with representatives of local authorities create conditions for community feedback and its meaningful input in decision-making (Tosun & Timothy, 2003; Cole, 2006). Participatory projects that focus on tourism problem solving show the potential to increase stakeholders' perceived control over environment. Desired participatory discourse empowers citizens as they are given opportunities to seek a voice in decisions that affect their lives (Timothy, 1999; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988). For example, Eguren (2008) finds that in developing countries like Guatemala and Bolivia, participatory processes bring people together on a relatively equal ground, and by improving the quality of communication and increasing the self-awareness of stakeholders. Also, participatory processes are incubators for relationships and they strengthen local groups and organizations (Perkins et al., 2002).

Scholars identified several limitations to participation in tourism decision-making in less developed countries. A summary of barriers to participation that appears the most relevant in the context of developing democracy of Poland is that proposed by Tosun (2000). He distinguished

between limitations at the operational level, structural and cultural limitations. Among operational limitations to community participation he focused on centralization of public administration of tourism development, lack of co-ordination between involved parties and lack of information available to the local people of the tourist destination. Among structural limitations to community participation in tourism development he pointed at negative attitudes of professionals that diminish successful participation, lack of expertise with similar approaches as well as domination of elite. Moreover high cost of community participation and lack of financial resources were also listed among the main constraints to community involvement in tourism decision-making. On the other hand apathy and low levels of awareness in the local community are the most significant cultural limitations to in relation to tourism.

Democratic rule of governance and benefiting from the membership in the European Union today require an effective approach to the problem of disengagement, especially in rural areas. Increasing the demands for residents' participation and promotion of the belief that long-term benefits for a community require stakeholders' input in tourism development ushered in a new understanding of the role of tourism in society (Clark, 1997; Tosun & Timothy, 2003). Solving problems at the central level proved ineffective, and nowadays documents such as *Strategy for Sustainable Development of Poland till 2025* more often articulate that local leadership institutions need to engage stakeholders in the development in order to achieve locally sustainable tourism (Mularska, 2008).

The participatory approach to tourism can be a turning point for many localities, as stakeholders must be given multiple opportunities to influence tourism decision-making outcomes (Tosun, 2000; Klekotko, 2008). Among other things, such assistance includes creating public spaces for stakeholders to communicate ideas regarding proposed developments, as well

as providing them with opportunities to express needs and concerns linked to tourism (Eguren, 2008). Distribution of decision-making power to local stakeholders necessarily integrates democratic elements into sustainable development of rural post-communist areas in Poland (Bora & Hausendorf, 2010).

In Poland sustainable tourism development can reduce the negative social and environmental impacts of tourism (Podedworna, 2008). At the same time, it strives to maximize tourism benefits and to assure their equitable distribution. One possible drawback of current tourism development efforts in Poland is that sustainable tourism projects are founded on the principles of economic growth (Pawlowski, 2008). In other words, economic development remains the overwhelming goal of sustainable practices, whereas the possibility of social development through tourism is largely neglected (Nederveen, 2001).

Better access to decision-making for different local interest groups facilitates the mobilization of rural society in post-communist Poland (Podedworna, 2008; Werynski, 2008). Cooperation among rural stakeholders, regardless of their different individual interests, requires implementation of unique local mechanisms (Weryński, 2008). Where rural authorities found stakeholders' empowerment valuable, they have facilitated social and political infrastructure that permits more control over tourism decision-making to the non-public sector. As one of such mechanisms, participatory tourism developments can be considered empowering for societies (Cole, 2006).

Sustainable tourism development agendas need to re-focus and include these opportunities while developing local tourism. Yet, still various uncontrollable factors can affect the empowerment. These factors co-determine whether rural society will reach capacity to act as

community (Wilkinson, 1991). Therefore, empowerment in sustainable tourism development is viewed as a latent effect of the development process.

2.5.1. Latent impact

Some impacts of sustainable tourism may be at first difficult to understand. Outcomes of social and economic processes can either enhance the adaptation of a social unit to current conditions or they can lessen its adjustment (Merton, 1968). Scholars pay attention mostly to the positive impacts of socio-economic processes, and they usually neglect the unintended negative outcomes. Merton (1968) on the other hand stresses the need to acknowledge the unintended consequences of different actions.

This study focuses on two possible latent impacts of participatory tourism in Pomeranian rural communities. First is the empowerment at a community level- manifested as a community field. Second, individual empowerment in the participatory tourism development demonstrated as a stakeholder's perception of gaining greater control over the outcomes of the tourism development process (Zimmerman, 1995). Participatory tourism development can empower rural stakeholders because it reduces perceived barriers to participation in other local affairs by creating opportunities for local actors to express their opinions and needs (Tosun, 2000). Due to better access to information about tourism development, stakeholders are able to stay connected to the local community field. Some community members, however, can view certain consequences of local processes as dysfunctional, whereas the same consequences are believed to benefit local society by other stakeholders (Merton, 1936, 1968).

Participants of a local community field either represent only their individual opinions and interests or they represent the interests of a group of rural stakeholders (Wilkinson, 1991). Participants in community action represent local residents' perspectives on, and opinions about

the subject matter (Etzioni, 2000). If rural stakeholders feel that current participants sufficiently represent their interests in tourism decision-making there is no need that they become directly involved in tourism decision-making (Young, 2000). Tourism development that is responsive to the needs and interests of rural society can empower stakeholders that are currently not directly engaged in the community activities, but have remained engaged in community field (Etzioni, 1996, 2000).

The chapter reviewed the scholarly research in order to elaborate on the conceptual model) that links social capital, empowerment and the interactional community field, within tourism development framework. The essential contribution of the study is to illustrate the rural post-communist dynamics in Pomerania by linking concepts that at first appear dissimilar and competitive in their nature (e.g. interactional community field and social capital). A conceptual framework I developed presumes that the empowerment at individual and community levels is a condition of rural societies that enable local democratic culture.

3. CHAPTER III: METHODS

The horizon of a research question is always confined in a person's style of reasoning (Pouliot, 2007). A research idea is developed before a researcher adopts specific techniques to generate knowledge (Fossey et al., 2002). In these circumstances, research methods need to match the unique context of the study.

I look at opportunities for participation in tourism decision-making in rural Pomerania. Local Action Groups, which reflect high popularity of the LEADER program in Pomerania, became important local decision-making centers. Given that popular LEADER principles focus on quality partnerships, the program is likely to facilitate interactions in which stakeholders can take certain positions by expressing preferences and needs of social fields they represent. The proposed research seeks to explore individual and community empowerment within the LEADER framework. The three concepts are examined: interactional community field, social capital and empowerment within LEADER and Local Action Groups in post-communist Pomerania.

Semi-structured interviews conducted with tourism stakeholders involved in LEADER were the main method of collecting qualitative data. Secondary, but equally an important technique to collect information about the empowerment in LEADER was the analysis of text such as documents from Local Action Groups or development plans. I increased my understanding of stakeholders' actions by reconstructing the meanings they hold (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). At the same time, I participated in the creation of these meanings during a series of interviews. Linking those meanings to the conceptual model became an important task.

In this process my background and past experiences filter development of the social inquiry and later interpretation of data (Schreiber & Stern, 2001). For example, while identifying the main themes that relate to the conceptual model, the researcher would give more or less importance to certain information on the basis of their perception and the quality of different sources (Schreiber & Stern, 2001). This study is clearly a result of my educational background in tourism development, and my experiences of cooperation with European Union development programs while working in a non-governmental organization. Given that my personal background influenced the interpretation of the data, the reader should be given an opportunity of independent evaluation of findings. Knowledge about my background and views of transition toward a democratic regime are therefore a significant component of the study's interpretative framework.

3.1. Personal background and views

I was born in 1981 in Bydgoszcz, one of the industrial cities of northern Poland. The reform movement that ended communism in East Central Europe began soon after. In 1989 the communists entered into round-table talks with Solidarity, an anti-communist trade union and a social movement. As a result, Poland held its first competitive elections since before World War II, and Solidarity formed the first noncommunist government since 1948. I grew up during the times of rapid political and economic transition. Before the collapse of the communist regime, numerous factories around the city secured jobs for the majority of its residents. Today they are either closed or many rely on foreign capital, and their economic prosperity is linked to uncontrollable events in other countries. The society with no or little spirit for competition was transformed into the society of competing individuals who at the same time were facing the changing character of social relations. People needed to adapt to this new reality regardless of

how long and how strong they had believed that the state would secure their future. At first I noticed only the positive effects of our changing economy. I saw that my family, neighbors and myself began to consume more goods imported from the Western Europe and also an increased diversity of consumed goods. I believed that the changes were good for everyone. However, I began to notice that people who did not manage to adapt to requirements of the new reality; they were the ones whose quality of life decreased as result of rapid economic and political transition.

The observations during my early adulthood reaffirmed my perception of that socio-economic transition toward open economy and the Western model of democracy improved only lives of some urban dwellers, while quality of life decreased for others. Also, for the first time I became considerate of the potential impact that transition had on rural development. During my final year of studies at the University of Economics in Poznan I came to realization that rural areas experienced the most dramatic changes, which seemed to worsen social and economic relations between public and private sectors in many areas.

I value tourism because I believe tourism development has the potential to foster communication and long-term cooperation between public and private sectors in rural Poland if it is sustainable. I joined a non-governmental organization to assist in the tourism development efforts. I noticed that the expectation of tourism encouraged representatives of public, private and social sectors to participate in the decision-making in the Greater Poland National Park (Wielkopolski Park Narodowy). Based on my observations and discussions with colleagues I concluded that participatory tourism decision-making could be useful as a tool to motivate rural tourism stakeholders to engage in local affairs. Since then I have been studying information that would help me to explore this concept and to create a relevant framework around problems of empowerment in tourism decision-making.

3.2. Rural communities in Pomerania and qualitative methods

Chapter II delivered a conceptual framework that connects an interactional community field and empowerment at a community level. The main conclusion is that an interactional community field as being a manifestation of empowerment at the community level. However, administrative arrangements in Poland define the quality of institutional framework for interactional community action. The following paragraphs briefly discuss the rural governance in Poland. All information for the section below unless indicated differently comes from the governmental website of Commission on Standardization of Geographical Names Outside the Republic of Poland (KSNG) (http://ksng.gugik.gov.pl/english/mapa_adm.php).

The Polish administrative system operates on three self-government tiers: voivodeship, powiat and gmina. Voivodeship is the main distinguished administrative unit and the highest self-government tier. It operates at the regional level with the main goal being facilitation and coordination of regional development. It also coordinates distribution of the European Funds within a region. A Voivod, who represents the national government in a region, is a legal watchdog and can veto the self-government's decisions if the decisions conflict with the national law or interest. A voivodeship consists of two types smaller administrative units performing local tasks: poviats and gminas.

A gmina is the basic unit of local government in Poland. Administrative criteria distinguish between *rural* and *urban* gminas, A mayor is a local executive officer. Gminas make decisions about spatial development and they define the place and the kind of businesses that should be developed. Gminas are also provided with tools to create local rules such as land and property tax rates exemptions and allowances.

Powiat, on the other hand, is an administrative unit linking gminas with voivodeships.

Poviats mainly execute public tasks of local character that go beyond gmina's capacity. Consequently a poviat functions as a supplemental administrative unit to a gmina in that it guarantees meeting the needs with larger scope than gmina's activities. It is a unique self-government tier because some tasks are assigned on behalf of the state administration. The poviat council makes decisions and a starosta is an executive officer. Pomerania consists of 16 land poviats and 4 cities with rights of a poviat, 42 cities and 2868 rural towns and villages. The area includes 123 gminas of which 81 are rural (Statistical Year Book of Republic of Poland, 2011).

The tourism development in Poland often happens within gminas, which are the administratively distinguished areas. However, tourism stakeholders often interact or cooperate across gminas. In this view interactional communities in Pomerania exist through participants' tourism activities. Interacting stakeholders view themselves according to roles in the tourism process and in doing so they construct a rural community. Intensity and direction of interactions are the main characteristics that distinguish the interactional community field from other social fields. Now, the crucial task is to find out to what extent Local Action Groups in Pomerania that emerge within LEADER development framework comprise characteristics of traditional rural interactional communities.

The tourism development process in Pomerania seems to be an important factor that impacts the character of interactions between stakeholders across social fields and therefore it impacts the overall character of community action. Better knowledge about how rural tourism stakeholders feel about themselves in the light of everyday tourism related activities, and how they experience the process of interactional community is critical to the understanding of empowerment within the LEADER framework.

Applied research techniques need to be complimentary with each other. These research techniques do not require innovative tools, but they must align with the rules of my reasoning (Pouliot, 2007). Knowledge created in this study closely reflects the locally constructed reality. Therefore stakeholders' voices should be present in the produced text.

3.3. Methods

The study examines empowerment at individual and community levels in the context of tourism decision-making within the LEADER program. The LEADER decision-making framework builds specific context for examination of the conceptual model. The qualitative nature of the question required interpretive and historical techniques in order to develop a better picture of the problem (Poulion, 2007). The analysis of official releases and articles about LEADER built context for the examination of stakeholders' views. However, in order to examine stakeholders' empowerment and perceptions of social relationships I conducted semi-structured interviews with representatives in local social fields such as agro-tourism, art associations and others. The kinds of local social fields represented in the study are discussed later in this chapter. The following section clarifies details of the data collection process.

3.3.1. Data collection

Multiple techniques of data collection provide a more complete understanding of the issues examined (Fossey et al., 2002). One of the primary and first sources of information about the LEADER approach in Pomerania were websites from the European Commission, The European LEADER Association for Rural Development and the Polish Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. It is necessary to emphasize that information I collected previously was about the EU rural development policy and sustainable tourism communities at the beginning of the doctoral program. Since then I read available archival documents (governmental and quasi-

governmental) and also articles that included current information about the European Union. During my second year at the university I expressed greater interest in the impacts of sustainable development on rural community in transitioning societies. These ideas formed my dissertation topic and led to the selection of information sources of about tourism development and the LEADER approach.

3.3.1.1. Analysis secondary data (text)

The main documents and articles (archive documents) used as primary sources of information about the European Union LEADER program and the same approach in Poland include:

- European Commission website about LEADER:
http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rur/leaderplus/index_en.htm
- The LEADER approach, Basic guide:
http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rur/leaderplus/pdf/factsheet_en.pdf
- Rural Development Policy 2007-2013:
http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rurdev/index_en.htm
- European LEADER Association for Rural Development:
http://www.elard.eu/en_GB/leader-approach
- Działania Programu Rozwoju Obszarów Wiejskich na lata 2007-2013 (Rural Development Program in Poland 2007-2013): <http://www.minrol.gov.pl>
- LEADER: <http://www.leaderplus.org.pl>
- Other relevant text such as scientific literature and academic reports

The websites listed above provided fundamental information about LEADER and knowledge of the EU rural development policy. However, I was mainly concerned with the

implementation of LEADER in post-communist members of the EU. Development frameworks such as LEADER were made available to them within the new rural development policies. Information included on the websites such as that of the Ministry of Agriculture and Development disclosed the national perspective on the LEADER program and an overview of its implementation in Poland.

In order to make a record of relevant information about EU rural development and the LEADER approach, I took notes that consisted of ‘text cuts’ from their original sources. Later I organized the information into the following main themes:

1. Evolution of the LEADER approach
2. The key elements of LEADER approach
3. Origins and development of Local Action Groups

On the other hand, the leading sources of information about the LEADER approach in Pomerania were the websites of the examined Local Action Groups, scholarly publications and text available through the Pomeranian Voivodeship Marshal Office (http://www.pomorskie.eu/pl/dprow/prow2007_2013/osie_prow/os_4). Briefly, publications that provided information about LEADER in Pomerania included:

- Documents released (if available) by Local Action Groups: available on a LAG’s website: annual reports, LEADER progress reports, newsletter
- Tourism development strategies: available through the Marshal Office and Pomeranian Voivodeship (http://www.pomorskie.eu/pl/dprow/dzialnia_umwp/lider/lsr)

Texts available online became sources of knowledge because they are easily accessible. Texts accessed through the above listed websites provided fundamental information about the

character of Local Action Groups as interactional communities in Poland, and their activities. As already emphasized, interactional community action is linked to empowerment at the community level. Therefore, seeking to examine the character of community empowerment that distinguish interactional communities according to Wilkinson (1991,p.90) and his followers, I looked at the following features of Local Action Groups:

- the development of relationships across interest lines;
- stakeholders' interest structure expressed through linking and coordinating actions,
- community action that provides a mechanism for at least partially transcending certain positions and perspectives of different social fields which coordinates other action fields.

The Pomeranian Marshal Office provides a list of all Local Action Groups that operate within Pomerania (http://www.pomorskie.eu/pl/dprow/dzialnia_umwp/lider/lsr). After the general evaluation of the LEADER approach and Local Action Groups I selected groups that would be further examined. In May 2010 I sent an email including information about the study goals and a request to cooperate to 16 Local Action Groups in Pomerania. I contacted the office management of six LAGs to discuss characteristics of each group and to answer their questions about this study. Given the LAG's character and willingness to cooperate, three Local Action Groups were chosen for further examination. The three selected LAGs appeared different in size and advancement of implementation of the LEADER approach. Below I present the most appealing differences between the selected groups.

Local Action Group I	Local Action Group 2	Local Action Group 3
<p>Local Tourism Association that operated for years became LAG</p> <p>The group of core members have remained the same for many years</p> <p>Familiarity among the core members of the LAG</p> <p>Unique LAG identity: shared goals and values among the core members</p>	<p>Foundation established in order to participate in LEADER and later became LAG II</p> <p>Residents of the area demonstrate passive behaviors and apathy</p> <p>Lack of unique LAG identity: difference of values and shared goals</p>	<p>New foundation established in order to participate in LEADER</p> <p>LAG was established by officials and is controlled by officials</p> <p>Lack of unique identity</p>

Table 1 Differences between examined Local Action Groups

Locally established relationships in many cases structure the distribution of decision-making in the examined areas of Pomerania. Therefore these relationships are another feature of interactional community action within the post-communist setting. Also, structural characteristics of places such as: (1) the local labor force and demographic profile (population size, density, and heterogeneity); (2) economic infrastructure (including transportation facilities, industrial base, and mix of retail and service establishments); (3) physical location (including whether or not it is near or at the rural-urban interface and its proximity to centers of economic expansion); and (4) its natural resource endowments determine differences between Local Action Groups (Flint et al. 2010).

Local development strategies provided a socio-economic context for the examination of stakeholders’ views of LEADER and development of LAGs. Due to high quality natural landscapes and tourism attractions, these development strategies regard tourism as a growing industry that diversifies activities of rural households. The documents stress still unrealized potential for tourism development. The LEADER framework encourages tourism activities in Pomerania rural areas. Within the LEADER framework, Local Action Groups became catalysts

for stakeholders' interaction of tourism actions. Thus as I hypothesized they became important local interactional centers.

The analysis of the texts was a process of reviewing, synthesizing, and interpreting documents with the main goal to identify characteristics of Local Action Groups in Poland. The main technique applied to make a record of and to organize textual data was again a 'cut text' technique, followed by synthesis and interpretation of my notes. I searched for: (1) demonstration of the LAG's character (2) statements of development goals and achievements, (3) scope of projects and their potential to empower diverse groups of tourism stakeholders (authorities vs. individual stakeholders).

Official releases and development strategies provide a limited understanding of the phenomenon examined in the study. Empowerment in tourism development cannot be evaluated solely based on the analyses of official texts about Local Action Groups and the LEADER approach. Therefore, in addition, semi-structured interviews show different views of LAG stakeholders.

3.3.1.2. Semi-structured interviews

The interviews aimed at examining stakeholders' empowerment in tourism decision-making. I emphasized the importance of subjective views in the overall understanding of empowerment (Schwandt, 2000). Interviews with LAGs' stakeholders show different perspectives on empowerment and they elicit their individual experiences with LEADER (Fossey et al., 2002).

A set of beforehand-prepared questions built the framework guiding each interview, this form of interview is less intrusive to participants as it encourages two-way communication. In order to place stakeholders' responses in a context I asked them to engage into their personal

histories and the stories of their relation with tourism. This approach assured more flexibility during the interviews. The general questions fit the concepts from the conceptual model in Chapter II. Further more these 4 issues relate to the concept of empowerment and social capital. Below I illustrate the arrangement of prepared questions during an interview, along with the main concepts they seek to explore.

- I. Social capital:** defined as resources such as information and new knowledge embedded in relationships among stakeholders. I looked for statements of
- a) Access to local resources (information, funding or knowledge);
 - Do you believe that you learned new thing
 - Do you think you have a better access to information now when you meet with others in LAG?
 - b) Relationships development within the LEADER framework;
 - Did you developed new friendships or maybe meet new partners for your business.
 - Do you believe that these new relationships are valuable and that you are benefiting or will benefit from them in the future?
 - c) Changing character of old relationships;
 - Did the participation in LAG change character or strengthen past relationships.
 - How did it change cooperation with other stakeholders? How?
- II. Empowerment:** Empowered stakeholders have a critical understanding of individual and political systems that leads to perception of sociopolitical control: the extent to which individuals perceive themselves as having the motivation and capacity to utilize social and political resources. Stakeholders believe that they are able to achieve the desired outcomes. I looked for statements of:

a) Stakeholders' perceptions of their role in tourism planning;

- What was your motivation to get involved in a Local Action Group?
- Do you think that the opinions of other stakeholders matter?
- What methods were used to encourage you to participation in the process of strategy development and membership in LAG?
- Do you feel that meetings about tourism development were well organized
- Did you feel that participants were able to express views and opinions as well as present their proposals?

b) Stakeholders' perceptions of control over tourism decision-making outcomes;

- What communication channels or forms of information sharing about ongoing tourism development activities do you prefer?
- Do you think that through membership in a Local Action Group you have more impact on the outcomes of tourism decisions making?
- Were your opinions, values and point of view respected in the process of strategy development?
- What could be the reasons for decreased interest in local strategy and general participation in LAG activities?

c) Understanding of social and political systems

d) Perception of Local Action Groups

III. **Participatory tourism development:** It generates public spaces for stakeholders to communicate ideas regarding proposed developments, and express tourism related concerns. I looked for statements of

a) The perception of the LEADER approach

- Do you think that in the future you will stay engaged in joint actions such as a LAG?
- Do you feel that the process of strategy development fostered participants' involvement in the area? (e.g. information about development process and organized meetings).

b) perception of tourism decision-making

The questions presented above are exemplary questions that guided the interviews.

Oftentimes some questions were slightly modified in order to fit an ongoing conversation. In addition, I asked more specific questions to receive extended explanations or to maintain the flow.

3.3.1.3. Sampling

Sampling is important element of the research process. Due to limited information about stakeholders from the private sector I experienced difficulties to proceed with the thoroughly designed sampling procedure. The sampling design aimed at selecting relevant individuals in order to explore the meaning, ideas and to subsequently build understanding as the analysis of information progressed (Rice & Ezzy, 1999). Initially, interviewees were selected from the lists of participants in the examined Local Action Groups. However scheduling the interviews was the most challenging task. I began the process in June and only in August I managed to arrange my first appointment with an interviewee. In reality, the majority of stakeholders contact information was obtained with snowball sampling method. This technique may have limited diversity of views among interviewees. For example an interviewed tour guide pointed at 3 other stakeholders I 'should' talk to and provided me with their phone numbers. However, the application of the snowball technique was the most reasonable solution (Fossey et al., 2002). In addition, this sampling strategy appeared a relevant way of utilizing and understanding networks between key actors in relation to tourism development in the area of research interest.

The sampling process continued until I decided that the themes have been sufficiently explored and diverse instances represented. I interviewed a total of twenty-one participants from the three selected Local Action Groups. First of all I focused on conducting interviews with representatives of the Local Action Groups in order to understand their views of LEADER and LAGs operations in selected areas. I interviewed office directors of LAG I and LAG II, a leader of the Decision Board and at the same time the President of the agro-tourism association, and a representative of the Board of Directors from LAG III, who also represented a gmina's interests in the group.

Aside from the leaders of Local Action Groups I interviewed eleven participants in LAG I, four participants in LAG II, and two participants in LAG III. I talked to seven stakeholders from LAG I, who owned an agro-tourism/ rural tourism business, a local artist, a tour guide and the owner of a restaurant. In fact only one stakeholder in LAG I was a representative of a local association. The list of interviewees from LAG I is as follows (The first names will be replaced with nicknames – just for now I need to have it here):

1. Director of LAG I office
2. Small Agritourism Owner - her and her husband have been active at the village level- she has been involved in school activities and cooperates with other women in the village. She is still highly motivated to improve the quality of life in the area through tourism development.
3. Local Artist: local artist who wants to open a small store with a museum. In the past he used to cooperate with local authorities in regards of his art products.
4. Owner of Small Agritourism Business – Agro-tourism business and renting space to keep horses. Involved in activities of other women in their area
5. Father- owner of accommodation, long time relationship with local authorities
6. Son: the son of Father, who is less involved than his father used to be and who is more skeptic about authorities engagement in tourism development.
7. Restaurant Owner: owner of a restaurant. She is also a long-term resident in the area and she has been locally active for many years.
8. Accommodation Owner: Owner of a hotel and other tourism attractions in the area. Born in the area and feels important and has been active locally for years.
9. Tour Guide –knowledgeable about the area. He feels empowered because of his historical knowledge about the area

10. Farmer I– Represents the farmers’ association, has been a member since the beginning of LAG I, social activist
11. New Accommodation Owner: Owner of small family-owned rural resort with recreation facilities. she needed support from LAG as she was new to the area. They (her and her husband) want to continue to develop their resort and add new attractions
12. Skeptic: owner of accommodation, described himself as an activist. He writes short articles to local magazines and newspapers.

I conducted interviews with six stakeholders in LAG II. Whereas four of the stakeholders represented interest of the private sector, two of the interviewees were also active members of local associations (Local Tourism Organization, Agro-tourism association). One of the stakeholders remained a very active participant of the LAG II Board of Directors and one interviewee represented a local cycling club. The list of interviewees from LAG I is as follows:

1. Director of LAG II office
2. Farmer II- owner of local tourism attraction (a watching tower). He believes he needs to stay active to achieve something.
3. The President of Local Tourism Organization- owner of kayak rental. At the time of the interview he was also a president of a local tourism organization
4. Small Local Agritourism Owner: owner of a family owned agro-tourism business
5. The president of the LAG II Decision Board: represents local agro-tourism association, active participant in LAG, represents the non-governmental sector
6. Representative of cycling association: cycling, not interested in other aspects of LAG – aims at increasing biking in the area

Only two stakeholders from LAG III were interviewed. One of the interviewees represented local authorities views of the tourism, LEADER and Local Action Group. The other interviewee represented local tourism association but also she identified herself as stakeholders from private sector. I was unable to get in touch with other representatives of the local private sector because their contact information was not available on the Internet.

1. Social Representative –Tourism Association, owner of tourism business
2. Authorities Representative: gmina representative from the Department of Promotion , member of Board of Directors of LAG III

In order to have a better understanding of the differences and similarities between the official and unofficial views of tourism development process in LEADER, Chapter V juxtaposed individual experiences of LEADER with official images promoted through official LAG releases. The two accounts construct more complete knowledge of the LEADER approach in Pomerania.

3.3.1.3.1. Transcript analysis

The important element of this study was the simultaneous processes of data collection and data analysis. The analysis of a new interview transcript would challenge or confirm findings from previous conversations (Schreiber & Stern, 2001). The first step was preparation of transcripts from digitally recorded interviews. Transcribing the entire conversations in their original language appeared the most reliable technique. This is so because I could re-read the complete interviews in order to assure that I took into consideration all significant statements. I analyzed each sentence and identified quotes that explained the examined concepts and indicated relations between them. I repeated the procedure two times. All the transcripts were analyzed in Polish in order to retain proper context to individual statements.

Coding aimed at the transformation of the raw data into concepts in relation with each other. During the first stage I carefully examined the transcripts in order to select a single unit of meaning. I did not use any software to assist in the coding. I carefully read the transcribed data, line by line, and divided the data into meaningful analytical units (segmented the data). When I located the meaningful segments, I coded them (marking the segments of data with descriptive words or category names). I continued the process until I segmented all of my data and completed the initial coding.

For example, the following quote indicates that tourism stakeholders may view participation in the LEADER program and Local Action Group as a source of funding for activities in their unique social field: “It is possible that they (participants in LEADER) will be active in their small fields they created with money from the Local Action Group– but not necessarily more than that” (Agro-tourism business owner). On the other hand another unit defined as ‘*familiarity among LAG stakeholders*’ demonstrated the status of relationships in the Local Action Group: “Everyone here knows everyone. We have met each other before and only people who work for the public sector are sometimes new. They work for Wojts so they don’t represent themselves but certain gminas- and Wojts have also known each other for years.” (Small Agritourism Owner)

During the next step I organized the existing units of meanings into broader categories that match those in a conceptual model. For example I grouped all segments that mentioned the character of relationships with the category ‘*relationships*’. The final step of the transcript analysis focused on identification and examination of relationships between the main categories. The model I arrived at as a result of the transcript analysis was discussed in the light of links between the main concepts proposed in Chapter II. For example, I sought to understand the link between the character of ‘relationships’ and the increased access to resources or individual empowerment.

3.3.2. Presentation of findings

The next two chapters focus on findings of the study. The descriptive character of the findings is due to the qualitative methods applied in the study. However, I am still concerned with demonstrating a clear link between the findings and the conceptual model. Chapter IV demonstrates findings primarily based on the analysis of texts about the LEADER approach,

whereas Chapter V includes the analysis of the three local development strategies and interviews with stakeholders of the three Local Action Groups. In order to provide a context for interviews and increase understanding of the phenomenon, the chapter presents detailed characterization of the areas. The main findings section is organized according to the main theoretical concepts proposed in Chapter II. The majority of the interviewees preferred to remain anonymous, and therefore I created nicknames that replaced their real names. Also the names of the three examined Local Action Groups in Pomerania remain unreleased because of the possible identification of these groups. The main goal of such procedure is to avoid negative consequences to stakeholders for participation in the interviews.

4. CHAPTER IV: THE LEADER APPROACH AND LOCAL ACTION GROUPS

This chapter starts with a section focused on the significance of rural tourism development and cooperation between public, private and social sectors in Pomerania. It provides the context for discussion of LEADER and Local Action Groups. This chapter's main goal is to assess whether the LEADER approach to tourism decision-making in Pomerania facilitates empowerment at a community level as it generates local centers for community development (Local Action Groups).

Previous studies note that tourism development within the LEADER framework fosters more cohesive socio-economic development in rural areas of Pomerania (Mysiak, 2007). Sustainable tourism is also a form of alternative development and it diversifies economic activities of rural households. The following sections recall several arguments in support of tourism development in rural Pomerania. Three aspects of LEADER frame the discussion about the character of empowerment at the community level within the LEADER program.

4. Evolution of the LEADER approach
5. The key elements of LEADER approach in Poland
6. Origins and development of Local Action Groups

The disappointment with transition to democracy and consolidation due to its economic and social costs reduced the number of rural initiatives. In particular, rural societies felt destabilizing effects of transition toward the European Union model..

4.1. Economic and social significance of rural tourism

Studies concerned with rural Pomerania pointed at the increasing economic and social impacts of tourism on the wellbeing of rural societies (Mysiak, 2007). Diversification of rural

household's income increases its independence from one source if benefits and promotes a more predictable economic environment (Hunek, 1993). Notably, many Pomeranian rural households regard tourism benefits as an additional source of income (Mysiak, 2007). By creating additional employment tourism reduces migration of young educated residents to cities (Hadzik & Hadzik, 2008). On the one hand the perspective of economic benefits from rural tourism motivates rural stakeholders (Mysiak, 2007). On the other hand the perspective of local development and reduction of unemployment motivates local governments to support rural stakeholders' actions and incorporate their agenda into the official development framework.

It has been suggested that rural tourism has a positive effect of reducing the social distance between rural and urban areas (Mysiak, 2007). Mysiak's (2007) proposes that rural tourism can be socially significant for Pomeranian rural societies in the following ways:

- Visitors to rural areas promote the rural life-style outside these areas
- The value of rural residents increases in the eyes of 'urban dwellers'
- Tourism raises social awareness among women in rural areas
- It contributes to renewal and development of local bonds and local identities.

Development of rural tourism may also lead to negative impacts such as social isolation of agro-tourism business owners from rest of the residents (Mysiak, 2007). Kaminski (2005) found that due to intensified interactions with each other, owners of agro-tourism businesses tend to neglect tourism needs of other rural households. On the other hand, uncontrolled private initiatives are believed to undermine local efforts to foster sustainable rural development within the new development policy framework (Wiatrak, 2003).

Rural tourism is an important component of rural social and economic landscape of Pomerania. Positive social impacts of rural tourism development include a change of social

attitudes and increasing civicness among rural residents (Mysiak, 2007). However, self-organizing local societies in Pomerania usually happens within the gmina where local authorities already facilitate development of rural tourism (Mysiak, 2007). With support of the local government many stakeholders understand that they can benefit more from tourism if they become involved in the pro-tourism activities (Mysiak, 2007).

Distribution of responsibilities for development to local authorities may at first appear insignificant in empowerment at the community level. However, these arrangements define the quality of institutional frameworks at the local level. The LEADER program is both a local development framework and a source of funding for the stakeholders' projects. As expected, when faced with current political and economic transitions the local authorities support the establishment of partnerships within the LEADER framework. Being a significant element of local economic and social landscapes, tourism is often a top development priority (Mysiak, 2007). This chapter examines empowerment at the community level based on the textual information regarding tourism development within the LEADER framework in Pomerania. To begin, the following sections illustrate the characteristic features and the evolution of the LEADER approach.

4.2. The role of LEADER in rural development

The industrialization of rural areas and modernization of farm production did not reduce the gap between rural and urban areas within Central and Eastern Europe. The top-down approaches to rural development neither met the expectations of its designers, nor had the projects' outcomes met the needs of rural societies. The LEADER approach was employed in response to rural problems emerging across the European Union and specifically used in Poland. The LEADER framework fosters the stakeholder's interaction and community action. However,

it also requires that some local stakeholders manifest enthusiasm to build formal partnerships (Local Action Groups) and cooperate. According to Cole's (2006) observations, empowerment at the community level involves stakeholders as agents of change that are capable of solving problems they face while making decisions and of implementation of the proposed solutions. Thus, the initial capacity to build partnerships impacts the overall ability of local stakeholders to act collectively as interactional communities.

4.2.1. The LEADER approach- evolution

LEADER is a part of the EU's rural development policy, which designed to help rural stakeholders realize local potential for long-term development (EU Rural Development Policy, 2008). The program aims to facilitate cooperation among civil, business and public sectors in rural micro-regions (Local Action Groups) (The Leader Approach: Basic Guide, 2006). In particular, it creates the legal basis for cross-sectoral partnerships. As a member of the European Union, Poland participates in the EU's joint rural development policy. During the years 2004-2006, the EU community's funds for rural development were mostly distributed through two programs: Rural Development Plan 2004-2006 and Sectorial Operational Program: Restructuring and modernization of the food sector and rural areas 2004-2006 (SPO ROL) (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2005). LEADER was a part of SPO ROL that aimed at mobilizing rural societies and involving stakeholders in the creation and implementation of local development strategies.

Currently, almost all improvements in rural areas in Poland occur through funding within the Rural Development Program 2007-2013. The budget of the Program is estimated for 17.2 billion Euros, with the European Rural Fund contributing the majority of the funds (13.2 billion)

(Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2009). European Council (2005) specifies four general objectives of the general EU Rural Development Program ((EC) No 1698/2005 art. 52):

1. Improving the quality of agriculture and forestry sectors
2. Improving natural environments and the countryside
3. Improving the quality of life in rural areas and economic diversification
4. LEADER

The Community Strategic Guidelines 2007-2013 indicate that resources mobilized for LEADER (incorporated in area 4) also support activities focused on the quality of rural life and diversification of rural economy (http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rurdev/index_en.htm; <http://www.un.org/esa/agenda21/natlinfo/countr/ec/agriculture.pdf>; COM(2005) 0299). Based on the given EU objectives for rural development, the Poland's Rural Development Program for Poland 2007 – 2013 defined 4 areas that agree with the above-presented objectives (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2005).

4.2.2. The key elements of LEADER approach

LEADER in Poland facilitates development of local partnerships (Local Action Groups) and stakeholder's participation in creation of local strategies (The LEADER approach: A basic guide: European Commission, 2006). Representatives of local interests establish Local Action Groups that are responsible for distributing funding within the LEADER framework.

LEADER emphasized the need for territory based, integrated and participatory approach to rural development. It promotes innovative projects that assure effects to foster integration among rural societies. (European Commission, 2000, 2000/C 139/05). At first implementation of the LEADER approach brought new dynamics into local politics of Western Europe, later the program principles were broadly promoted across the new EU members, including Poland.

Today it is still the most flexible development framework within the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) that facilitates bottom-up rural development (Wilkin & Nurzynska, 2008). In many transitioning rural societies in Poland, LEADER provides opportunities to improve the quality of local interactions due to creation of interactional spaces.

Wilkin and Nurzynska (2008) note that LEADER in Poland started relatively late, compared to other regions of the European Union. At that time in Poland rural partnerships were already a popular form of cooperation between stakeholders (Budzich-Szukala, 2008).

Awareness of the unrealized development potential of tourism led to mobilization of some local resources (tourism resources) and cooperation in the form of partnerships beyond the LEADER framework. However, LEADER principles appear to further strengthen local cooperation.

Studies show that LEADER has a particularly positive impact on local social development (Budzich-Szukala, 2008). It improves the cohesion of local decision-making and strengthens local social capital due to development of new social relationships. Budzich-Szukala (2008) distinguishes the following key characteristics of LEADER:

- a) Area-based: Funds are dedicated to a designated area. Residents should be able to distinguish themselves as an integrated community and identify common development goals. The area's physical borders need to be identified by stakeholders and they do not need to be the same as administrative borders.
- b) Bottom-up: Local rules are the result of locally expressed needs and local ideas for development. Local stakeholders implement projects funded within the LEADER framework.

- c) Integrated: the LEADER approach assumes that local environment is self-regulating and only actions that target all its elements can be efficient. In successful rural societies social relationships between stakeholders lead to cooperation utilizing their resources.
- d) Partnership: Stakeholders participate in development planning and decision-making. Also, later they participate in implementation of the decision-making outcome. The local interactions lead to partnerships in the form of Local Action Groups. LAGs welcome the participation of local stakeholders that represent different interests. Thus, LAGs become formal organizations and the dynamic centers of local action.
- e) Innovation: Local Action Groups promote innovative actions.
- f) Decentralized management and financing: The group, which represents stakeholders' interests, makes autonomous decisions about the distribution of the LEADER funds.
- g) Cooperation and networking: Local Action Groups cooperate as a network of relationships as well as they cooperate with other LAGs within the European Union.

In the context of political and economic transition, the essential elements of the LEADER approach are cooperation among local authorities, participation of the private sector in decision-making and mobilization of local resources. Such approaches are, however, usually more effective when incorporated into supportive national and regional development policies. In other words, national and regional level policies should provide rural stakeholders with means to utilize local resources (European Commission, 2000, 2000/C 139/05).

Whereas the Regional Operational Program for Pomerania Region 2007-2013 supports the LEADER approach at the regional level, Rural Development Program 2007-2013 maps out the development landscape at the national level. At the local level the leadership of rural stakeholders ensures implementation of the local development strategies. Local Actions Groups

link national and regional development programs to local context by building local capacity to implement locally created development strategies.

4.2.3. Origins and the current characteristics of Local Action Groups in Poland

Initially the LEADER program in Poland was design to be implemented in two schemes. The first scheme focused on the estimation of the local potential for development of different sectors and the process of building local development strategies coordinated by Local Action Groups. Other main activities within the first scheme included training and advisory courses that promoted stakeholders' participation in LAGs decision-making.

The first scheme provided significant support to emerging Local Action Groups and development of local strategies. As a result of the first scheme 324 emerging partnerships applied for the formal status of Local Action Groups. Areas in which conflict dominated over partnerships, local action and cooperation found it difficult to obtain formal status in the Local Action Group. Also, funding from LEADER was limited to the local partnerships that managed to establish a Local Action Group as a result of stakeholders' cooperation. On the other hand the second scheme has focused on the implementation of the strategies by successful LAGs. The implementation process is continuing process in Poland and there have been no generally accepted indicators of how successful the implementation process has been so far.

Budzich-Szukala (2008) notes that interacting stakeholders often address their private interests and forget about the partnership building and cooperation. However, stakeholders don't want to commit to hastily established groups as they don believe that activities of such groups are effective. The good examples of local partnerships encourage participation of new stakeholders, while negative examples strengthen skeptical attitudes. Budzich-Szukala (2008) identifies the following main characteristics of Local Action Groups in Poland:

- Local Action Groups in Poland exist in the form of a foundation such as an association or union of associations; LEADER approach requires that LAG participants from the public, private and social sector have equal rights in the partnership.
- Many LAG projects are hindered because of difficulties in obtaining support from local governments.
- The process of building local strategies lacked an institution that could assist local stakeholders in solving conflicts related to the decision-making and policy planning process.

After 2007, LAGs could be established under supervision of the Marshal's Office. The formal supervision of regional authorities over LAGs simplified the process of connecting LAGs' activities with regional policies. It reduced the number of actions that would benefit local society unless they agreed with the regional policy framework.

As an important element of the rural social and political landscape in Poland, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development has recommended that Local Action Groups should focus on the following activities (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2009):

- Action 1. Integrated bottom-up territorial development: A group should operate in areas with similar physical characteristics relatively socially homogenous rural area in terms of physical features and local societies. LAG members must consist of at least 50% from local associations and the business sector. Efficiency of such tri-sectorial (non-profit organizations and associations, businesses and officials) partnerships is considered crucial for an area's integrated development.
- Action 2. Cooperation between rural areas included in local development strategies as well as among LAG regions of Poland (interregional cooperation) or between LAG

regions in different countries (international cooperation).

- Action 3. Participation in the national information network: A network unit collects, analyzes and distributes the information about good practice within a country. It organizes the exchange of experience, the know-how and provides technical assistance for such cooperation.

Activities planned in local development strategies are the most significant in terms of current rural development in Poland. From 2008 Local Action Groups could apply for funding for projects toward the implementation of local development strategies. Out of 344 applicants, 338 Local Action Groups received funding. LAGs are eligible to redistribute funds to projects proposed by rural stakeholders. There are 16 Local Action Groups in Pomerania, which became responsible for the implementation of local strategies (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2009, <http://www.wrotapomorza.pl>).

From an interactional perspective the diversity of LAG participants is an important characteristic of the group. The analysis of multiple Local Action Groups in Poland published by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (2009) demonstrates that representatives of the social sector constitute the majority of LAGs' participants. Social fields that usually participate in LEADER include:

- Individual farmers
- Representatives of local society
- Education, sport and culture
- Youth organizations
- Voluntary firefighters organizations
- Women organizations

- Other organizations for local development

Before LEADER, any activities of local social fields listed above had to rely on funding from local authorities. The analysis conducted by Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (2009) shows that the least represented social field in Local Action Groups are youth organizations (26%). The public sector that includes authorities, public schools and public cultural organization constituted 19% of all LAGs' participants (eleven for every LAG). The least represented in LAGs was the private sector with only 17% of participants (nine for every LAG). The private sector includes restaurants, farms, agro-tourism businesses and banks that are a part of supply chain in rural tourism (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2009). Hence, Local Action Groups need further investment in cross-sectoral interactions and the participatory character of LAG decision-making.

Local Action Groups can be considered as manifestations of interactional community fields. Hence diverse members of their decision bodies are desirable. Public sector stakeholders are usually the majority in Decision Boards (56%), whereas only 6% of votes belong to the private sector representatives (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2009). Low participation of the private sector is worrisome as LAG's action may in fact exclude it from the benefits of LEADER.

Budgets of Local Action Groups also indicate their character. Tourism development and better promotion of the area are usually the main goals included local development strategies. Data indicate that on average about 22% of LAG's budget contributes to tourism promotion and development actions (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2009). At the same time, with limited budgets for tourism promotion, mobilizing local resources was the priority for the 43% of LAGs examined by the Ministry.

Summarizing the budget structure for LAGs, it was shown that 37% of the entire LAG budget is assigned to the priority: “*Renovation and rural development*” (the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2009)., Renovation and investments in rural development projects require co-funding from the public authorities. The repercussion is for example increased dependence on views of local officials.

The least funded groups of activities are: “*Creation and development of micro-businesses*” and “*Diversification toward non-agricultural activity*”. Diversification of economic activities appears to be more important to small LAGs than to medium size LAGs. Finally, actions applying for funding within the priority “*Small projects*” received 22% of available funds. Local Action Groups that assigned more funds to “*Small projects*” usually had reduced funding for “*Renovation and rural development*”. On the other hand, LAGs that assign more funds to “*Renovation and rural development*” limit financial support for: “*Small projects*”. The two priorities appear closely linked in the eyes of the Local Action Groups examined by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (2009).

The sections above used available studies and archival documents about LEADER and Local Action Groups to show the general character of Local Action Groups. In post-communist rural areas in Poland, LAGs are entirely responsible for the implementation of the LEADER approach. Participants can interact in local spaces created within the LEADER framework. Therefore LEADER is often a catalyst for stakeholders’ interaction in rural areas. The following sections focus on the LAGs examined by the author in Pomerania.

4.3. The character of LAGs in Pomerania

In tourism the context, the interactional community field exists because stakeholders participate in tourism development. This section examines the character of interactional

community fields in Pomerania. In other words it investigates the character of empowerment at a community level. The following elements of Local Action Groups will be highlighted:

- Conditions for operation of Local Action Groups
- Interactions across interest lines
- Mechanisms that coordinate action of local social fields
- Structures expressed through linking and coordinating actions of social fields

To date the most comprehensive documents guiding development within the LEADER framework are the local development strategies. Each Local Action Group is required to work out such a strategy in order to be able to redistribute LEADER funds. Also, LEADER engages local stakeholders from private, public and social sectors to participate in Local Action Groups. This approach goes along with the argument that local residents, business owners and authorities know best how to use their assets to guarantee social and economic revival. Findings are based mainly on the content of development strategies.

4.3.1. Conditions for operation of Local Action Groups

The local strategic plans should be created through participatory processes. Then they can best manifest local historical, cultural and socio-economic conditions for development. This section illustrates the historical and socio-economic context for the LEADER approach and the development of the examined Local Action Groups included in local development strategies.

LAG I covers the area with vast historical heritage. Elements of the material culture and local folklore include traditional embroidery and ceramics with local motifs, sculpture and painting on glass as well as folk music. On the other hand, regional rites and customs are the unique non-material elements of traditional culture.

Kashubs have demonstrated strong attachment to local traditions maintained in everyday

life. Also, the Kashubian language continues to be taught at local schools. Strong local identity creates favorable conditions for cooperation within the LEADER framework.

On the other hand the area of LAG II consists of 19 gminas of which many stand out as potentially unique rural tourism destinations (Local Development Strategy II, p.26). Visitors can travel to a number of small lakes, the Baltic Coast or enjoy the natural preserves such as Slowinski National Park or Slupia River Valley Scenic Park. Local culture is a mix of different traditions that came with the immigrants after World War II. Immigration led to diversification of culture and less attachment to local traditions.

Local Action Group III is the youngest out of the examined groups and the area consists only of six gminas. Tradition is important but it does not appear as important in LAG III actions as it seems to be in the other examined Local Action Groups. This may be so because many residents in the area after the World War II were resettled refugees. LAG III was established in 2006 under the supervision of the Marshal Office of the Pomerania. Sustainable rural development and participation of rural society in development efforts are leading goals of the group.

4.3.1.1. Social and economic conditions

In 2006, the total of 115 thousand people resided in the LAG I area (General Statistics Office, 2007). Dense socio-economic relationships and cooperation among local authorities are distinctive features of the region. People from the area share the history and many traditions (Rural Development Strategy I, p.39).

About 150 local organizations operate in the area. However, 18 active organizations for each 10,000 residents may not build sufficient support for residents' initiatives (Local Development Strategy I, p.31). In addition only six organizations focus on tourism promotion or

recreation. Women in the area usually mobilize through *Associations of Rural Housewives* (22 associations).

On the other hand, the character of this Local Action Group is influenced by the quality of social infrastructure that supports distribution of information and local interactions. These local libraries, museums, local cultural centers and events in the area may facilitate the local community field because they encourage interactions among community stakeholders.

The analysis of Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats, conducted in cooperation with rural stakeholders, identified several weaknesses that are directly related to tourism development. Insufficient promotion of regional culture and underdeveloped social infrastructure add to the low capacity for self-organizing, and thus, inability to coordinate local action. Other major economic weaknesses include: the low quality of existing tourism infrastructure, or the low quality of tourism service.

The current character of local developments (e.g. increased investments in accommodation, authentic restaurants with local cuisine, festivals and other events promoting local culture) suggests that tourism will have a major impact on diversification of local rural economy (Local Development Strategy I, p.36). Even though rural tourism is growing, agriculture still remains an important source of a household's income (9,000 agriculture households). Services and agriculture currently dominate in the LAG I area.

Regardless of the diverse culture and beautiful landscapes, realizing tourism potential in LAG II appears more challenging. Poor road infrastructure limits the tourism benefits of local destinations located further away from the coastline (Local Development Strategy II, p.43). Yet, the increasing number of hotels and restaurants (from 469 in 2002 to 575 in 2006) demonstrates

improving local initiative (Local Development Strategy II, p.37). Also, multiple cultural events that relate to rural traditions engage rural artists and folklore groups from the area.

Whereas agriculture still dominates, already 200 households made tourism an additional source of their income. Similarly to LAG I, in LAG II area stakeholders from different sectors do not cooperate with each other. They appear to prefer pursuing tourism promotion and development independently.

The area includes 350 officially registered associations, and over 100 art clubs and other local interest groups (Local Development Strategy II, p. 41). Local organizations coordinated promotional events, sport events and educational activities. Gminas' budget used to be a major source of funding for them. However, many proposed actions have not received funding from local authorities recently and other funding sources became necessary. Many towns in the area have already received funding from LEADER for 'renovation of rural areas'. However, many smaller towns still have difficulties to obtain funds because local authorities don't have enough experience in the application process.

Participants in the process of building local development strategies identified several important social strengths. First of all it was suggested that better mobilization of rural local resources in the development efforts and improving the local identity would be very helpful (Local Development Strategy II). Whereas a growing number of local stakeholders acknowledged the benefits of the bottom-up decision-making, the main limitations for development include passive and skeptical attitudes, migration of young educated residents to the cities, and complicated procedures to receive funding for local action. In addition to that no history of cooperation among public, social and private sectors limits efforts to capitalize on rural development opportunities. In these circumstances LAG II aims at changing the existing

power relations within the local societies by providing opportunities and funding for tourism initiatives separately from local authorities.

Areas included in LAG III show high potential for tourism development based on natural attractions (for example forests represent 35%). Two gminas have access to the Baltic Sea with the most beautiful beaches along the Baltic coast in Poland. Other attractions include eight lakes, the Slowinski National Park (<http://www.slowinskipl.pl>) and Seaside Scenic Park (<http://www.npk.org.pl/>). Even though tourism is an important economic activity, tourists limit visits to the Baltic coast.

Rural households don't cooperate with local associations instead they promote the rural life-style and local cuisine independently. The main problem of the area is the poorly designed road infrastructure that has significantly decreased the quality of tourism there. Consultations with tourism stakeholders revealed that also additional investments in tourism infrastructure such as roads, trails and other attractions and are needed in order to diversify economic activity. Also, further development of tourism-related services such as food and leisure services is necessary (Local Development Strategy III, p. 31).

LAG III members understand the need to mobilize local resources and foster cooperation for tourism. However, effectiveness of LAG III actions depend upon the quality of current social infrastructure for stakeholders' interactions. Although, local non-governmental organizations, associations, and individuals involved in local culture appear to be socially and politically active (Local Development Strategy III, p.30), it is unclear how many stakeholders stay involved in the tourism field.

Stakeholders from each gmina had an opportunity to participate in the SWOT analytical process through a public consultation. Representatives of the private, social and public sectors

received the SWOT questionnaire. Insufficient cooperation among stakeholders from the same gmina and cooperation across gminas remains a significant weakness.

The growing interest in the LEADER approach for rural development is threatened by the multiplying assignments that are not supported by LEADER funds. In other words, LEADER participants must perform a number of tasks that are additional to their own Local Action Group III has no experience in coordinating the distribution of LEADER funding. Therefore, additional training about participatory approaches to decision-making for local officials is needed. Poor tourism promotion reduces positive effects of the LEADER framework. On the other hand, integrated tourism promotion can happen as a result of workshops and training that foster tourism cooperation. They improve skills and facilitate interaction among participants.

4.3.2. Partnership building

LAGs provide structure for rural stakeholders and direct their actions; thus, they facilitate the interactional community field (Kay, 2005; Wilkinson, 1991). LAG I has operated since 1996 as a destination management organization focused on tourism promotion. In 2006 the organization was transformed into a Local Action Group in order to adapt its structure to the requirements of LEADER.

The core tourism stakeholders began building partnerships with focus on the LEADER framework already in 2004. They organized informative meetings and consultations with other residents about the future character of local developments. These meetings aimed at increasing residents' knowledge and mobilizing local resources for cohesive development.

In 2006, the group received funding from LEADER. At first, the LAG I area included 9 gminas. In order to agree about all aspects of LAG I and identify potential LAG members, the local tourism organization organized almost 40 meetings. In 2008 the LAG organized another

series of meetings with stakeholders. These events also created new opportunities for stakeholders to become involved in LAG I and to participate in LEADER.

At the time of partnership building, the group already included 44 members of which 57% represented the social sector (25 representatives) that was composed mostly of folk artists and tour guides dominated the representatives of the social sector. Only 18% of participants identified themselves as representatives of the private sector. This is an insufficient number of private stakeholders to effectively balance influences of local authorities.

Building a partnership in the form of a LAG is a continuous process. LAG I adopted four main criteria to evaluate stakeholders seeking membership (Local Development Strategy I):

- The level of support for the goals of LAG I and action toward realization of these goals
- Demonstrated willingness to obey the status of LAG I;
- Potential to actively engage in activities of LAG I;
- Pay an annual membership fee.

The current criteria of the membership in LAG I leave room for decisions based on the subjective judgment of a committee. Therefore personal relationships between stakeholders may influence the decision about one's membership. More details about the role of individual relationships in Local Action Group I will be presented in the following chapter based on the interviews. This section will stay focused on the community level analysis.

The partnership building process appeared even more important for the future character of LAG II. First events between October 2007 and December 2010 focused on building relationships between stakeholders and cooperation regarding local development strategies. A total of 500 residents participated in the meetings. Also, during the meetings LAG II distributed surveys examining stakeholders' needs and expectations regarding LEADER. The findings

suggest that the expectations exceeded abilities of LAG II to support projects within the LEADER framework.

According to the office director of LAG II, the campaign run by leading gminas motivated many stakeholders to mobilize their resources. Meetings focused on planning for development within the LEADER framework enrolled about 200 participants. Local leaders and representatives of local association discussed participation in LEADER and the concept of creating Local Action Group II. As a result several stakeholders established this organization. The following steps focused on fostering interactions between stakeholders. Workshops and educational meetings increased participants' familiarity with each other and familiarity with LEADER. They provided stakeholders with valuable experience that was expected to foster implementation of the LEADER approach in the area.

The Local Development Strategy for LAG III only briefly describes the character of the partnership building and therefore it is difficult to assess the quality of the process. The main focus of LAG III is the implementation of LEADER and coordinating actions between the private, social and public sectors. Currently LAG III includes only six gminas from the region (<http://www.bursztynowypasaz.pl>). Its action should fit the local context and meet expectations of local stakeholders.

4.3.3. Community structure

The Decision Board (DB) is the most influential unit of each LAG in terms of decision-making. Precisely, the Board is responsible for redistribution of LEADER funds and at least 50% of the current members must be present at a meeting in order to make a valid decision. LEADER requires that the private and social sectors have at least 50 % of the Board's total votes in decision-making. The LAG I Board members include:

- Public sector: 9 members (50%)
- Private sector: 4 members (22%)
- Social Sector: 5 members (28%)

However, public sector members are able to make important decisions if representatives of private and social sectors are not present at meetings. The expensive membership fee (1000 PLN) can also be a barrier to participation of the private sector. Furthermore this situation may lead to negative perceptions of LAG I, and the decision-making process. Also, such rules reduce diversity of LAG I participants and local authorities have considerable influence on LAG actions.

Out of about 190 stakeholders who expressed interest in LAG II, representatives of local authorities and other public sector units accounted for 40% of total members, while the rest of members came from the socio-economic sector (consisting 36% social sector, 24% private sector) including organizations, private enterprises and individuals (Local Development Strategy II, p. 11). The findings from analysis conducted in 2010 show that only 32% of members (38 members) represent the public sector. Based on the above numbers I conclude that because of differences in the LAG II structure, the character of interactions among the LAG II participants may differ from the character of participants' interactions in LAG I.

The Decision Board holds the most of decisions-making power. It includes representatives from all participating gminas and sectors. The public sector accounts for about 45% members of the Board, while the socio-economic sector makes up 55% of the total participants. One of the representatives in the Decision Board is selected by gmina officials, while the other representatives are elected from the local candidates (Local Development Strategy II, p.14).

Whenever a new stakeholder joins a Local Action Group II they immediately become members of a '*Partners' Forum*', which gives advice to the main units of LAG II. Also new members immediately become members of communal groups focused on gmina interests. The local development strategy mentions 19 communal groups that operate in the LAG II area.

The LAG expects that public awareness of its actions will increase due to intensive promotion. Another intended outcome of promotion is stakeholders identification with the group priorities (Local Development Strategy II, p.12). Shared goals and elements of identity facilitate joint actions toward wellbeing of the LAG II community. However, the increasing number of stakeholders interested in LAG II is challenging to coordinate (Interview with President of the Decision Board).

In December 2008, LAG III consisted of 23 members (70%) from the social sector, 5 members (15%) from the business sector and 5 representatives (15%) of the public sector. Stakeholders included: local associations and foundations, cultural and sport centers such as museums, local artists, sport clubs or voluntary firefighters. Similarly to LAGs I, and II, the Decision Board in LAG III is the most influential body. It is directly responsible for the distribution of LEADER funds. Also, 50 % of the Board members come from the social and private sectors. It includes five members from the public sector, eight members from the social sector and three members from the private sector. Relatively low participation among representatives of the private sector (19%) (Local Strategy for Development, 2010, p.8) is problematic because one of the main tasks of LAG III is to facilitate local partnerships and tourism cooperation across the three sectors. Members of the Board are the most active stakeholders and they demonstrate some experience in the local associations. For example, many members of the Board, who represent the social sector, are also active leaders in gminas. It is

unclear how LAG III would mobilize other less involved stakeholders from the private sector. Diversity of LAG participants is usually a desired characteristic of LAG communities. However, it did not appear to be the priority for LAG III. Distribution of power within the group and the quality of stakeholders' involvement are under question. Conducted interviewees provide more information about individual views of the LAG character.

4.3.4. Community action

The community field provides a mechanism for at least partially transcending certain positions and perspectives of different local social fields. It does so by pursuing general community interest defined as interest in structure and locality wellbeing. The main activities of Local Action Groups focus on redistribution of LEADER funds, stakeholders training and implementation of projects strengthening relationships among partners from three sectors. Also, their actions usually indirectly facilitate relationships across local social fields.

Participants in LAG I have sufficient skills to implement the LEADER approach and to coordinate re-distribution of funding within the LEADER framework (Local Development Strategy I, p.15-16). A survey conducted by LAG I illustrates that 12 stakeholders (67%) in the Board of Directors (LAG's control unit) had knowledge about LEADER in rural Pomerania. Representatives of the core stakeholders in LAG I are long-time residents and many of them (50%) have experience with implementation of the rural projects. They are also aware of local resources for development of rural tourism and additional funding available from LEADER. Stakeholders identified the following goals for LAG I reported in the document (Local Development Strategy I, p.91-94):

1. To increase the quality of life
2. To mobilize local resources through increasing social capital

3. To preserve cultural and natural heritage and use of this heritage through sustainable development
4. To create jobs outside the agriculture sector.

Sustainable development through tourism requires active and empowered stakeholders.

Therefore, promoting cooperation between public, private and social sectors, as well as fostering relationships among stakeholders from different sectors are important tasks for LAG I. More cooperation among LAG I stakeholders from private and social sectors would complete the so far insufficient cooperation among gminas (Local Development Strategy I, p. 50).

Other important tasks include creation of alternative interactional 'spaces', better information and promotion systems as well as building support for stakeholders' initiatives.

Local events are expected to improve the flow of information and facilitate development of local relationships (Local Development Strategy I, p.56). Also mobilization of stakeholders' resources for tourism development can trigger other social processes because of the diversity of participants in LAG, who represent different local interests. The stakeholders interact with each other and learn to cooperate in order to meaningfully participate in local development (Kiefer, 1984). According to the document of the Strategy Development I, Local Action Group I is expected to support the following local activities:

1. Action of local interest groups such as hobbyists' clubs and other organizations;
2. Promotion of local interest groups
3. Organization of local events: for example through local cultural centers where residents spend their free time
4. Promotion of LAG I area in International and National Tourism Trade Fair
5. Tourism education training and skills development (e.g. in self-organizing)

6. Tourism promotion in media and through brochures
7. Developing and promoting new tourism products – e.g. Nordic Walking
8. Development of tourism and recreation infrastructure
9. Exchange of experience in use of local resources in sustainable development.
10. Agrotourism based on local resources and regional traditions.

Given the proposed goals and activities supported by Local Action Group I, participation in the LAG should be an important concept as local stakeholders best represent local needs.

LEADER introduced a new approach to rural development. The LAG actions are integrated as they aim at engaging different sectors. Projects within the LEADER framework are implemented within gminas. Actions classified as ‘*Small Projects*’ are evaluated by a elected committees of stakeholders. The selected proposals must satisfy the following criteria:

1. Experience in implementation of projects funded from public sources;
2. Innovation: solutions and technology, activities, use of local resources;
3. Reach of the project (one village/town or more)
4. Cooperation between stakeholders
5. Funding (15 000; <20 000; >20 000)
6. Number of representatives involved in the project
7. Implementation improves the quality of tourism and recreation
8. To what extent project’s implementation promotes of local products

Also, projects related to the revitalization of rural areas or diversification of economic activities, need to meet the selection criteria. The difference between these and “*Small Projects*” is available funding and the projects’ scope (Development Strategy I, p.121-151). The selection criteria appear clear, fair and they promote the collaboration among local stakeholders and

gminas. A group of LAG participants evaluate the proposals according to the above selection criteria. It consists of stakeholders who have actively participated in actions within the Local Action Group.

Similarly to LAG I, LAG II actions aim at improving the quality of rural life, promotion of the rural landscape and support for diversification of stakeholders' economic activities (Local Development Strategy, p. 42). LAG II participants seek to utilize their resources and to mobilize other stakeholders. For the first time stakeholders identified their goals during workshops organized in the first stage of LEADER. The goals were established on the basis of findings from the SWOT analysis and the survey of residents' needs (Local Development Strategy II, p. 48). Other LAG II actions aim at improving the infrastructure such as bike trails, water infrastructure, and canoe water trails.

Local natural and cultural assets are the core elements of the unique local tourism product in the LAG II area (www.zielonesercepomorza.pl). Therefore, mobilization of stakeholders' individual resources is an important element in the process of achieving the proposed goals. LAG's II focus on the leadership training and social events facilitate local interaction. In fact, any project that requires stakeholders' cooperation integrates different local social fields.

Local Action Group II recognized that stakeholders' interaction and cooperation should become its priorities. Tourism is expected to increase residents' income, encourage local entrepreneurship, and integrate local society (Local Development Strategy II). It provides the stakeholders with information, training and consultation about the LEADER approach. Given the priorities of sustainable development LAG II should also take into consideration the elements of social infrastructure such as local social capital (Local Development Strategy, p. 62). In turn it fosters stakeholders' cooperation in regards to tourism development.

To date tourism development in the area was neither well organized nor was it incorporated into any official development framework. LEADER brings tourism actions together under a set of common development goals (Local Development Strategy II, p. 73). In this aspect, the priority of LAG II is to provide support for smaller rural areas that mobilize resources of local stakeholders (Local Development Strategy II, p.75).

In order to be able to implement rural projects stakeholders need to apply for LEADER funding. Many however may view this rule as discrimination against the stakeholders who have not become members of the LAG. Stakeholders who participated in the strategy building process are believed to have the better knowledge and understanding of the LEADER approach and they are more likely to receive funding from this development framework.

The main focus of Local Action Group III is simply distribution of LEADER funds to local projects. Therefore, the process of strategy building involved consultations and meetings with local representatives of the private, social and public sectors., Representatives of the three sectors received a questionnaire regarding perceived strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats to local rural development (SWOT) from a group of experts leading the entire process.

In the context of tourism development the most important identified strengths are: attractive natural resources and cultural heritage attractions. However, the insufficient cooperation among stakeholders limits potential tourism benefits. Also, other threats that may reduce positive impacts of LEADER include increasing numbers of assigned tasks without additional funding for them and poor promotion of rural tourism.

The priority of LAG III is to increase the tourist attractiveness of the region through mobilization of local resources (Local Development Strategy III, p.59). Local Action Group III regards “tourism [...] the main economic sectors activity that provides income to the majority of

rural households”. It is implied that all tourism stakeholders should engage in strengthening social and economic development through tourism. However, it is unknown to what extent the vision of the area and LAG III action goals reflect the needs and views of local social fields. Workshops and training improve stakeholders’ skills facilitate local social relationships and stakeholders’ cooperation. Also, goals and objectives articulated in the Local Development Strategy should reflect their needs.

Funded projects aiming at improving the quality of life and economic diversification fall into five main categories: non-agricultural activities (10% of total available funds), development of micro-enterprises (10% of total available funds), rural renewal and development (67.96 % of total available funds), small projects, (12.04% of total available funds) skill training and distribution of information about LAG actions (Local Development Strategy III, p.58, p.80).

Ideally, small projects from rural stakeholders should promote the area through local art, cultural and sport events as well as other elements of tourism infrastructure. On the other hand actions aimed at rural renewal and development focus on the creation of public spaces for residents’ interaction such as parks and town squares. In order to encourage stakeholders to cooperate, LAG III provides advice about the application and implementation process. Current practices toward revitalization of rural areas appear to support development of road infrastructure more than initiatives of small businesses. Therefore an important task is the evaluation of tourism research and effects of LEADER.

The members’ structure and goals articulated in Local Development Strategies are indicated in various forms of interactions among local stakeholders. On the other hand the strategy building process manifests LAG’s ability for action and impacts relationships among

participants. Therefore the following section focuses on actions such LAGs decision-making with particular consideration of the strategy building process.

4.3.4.1. Building Local Development Strategy

The process of building local development strategies within the LEADER framework must employ specific procedures. These procedures aim at recognition of local needs that further guide the character of a development strategy. As a result, the strategy building is expected to include elements of the participatory approach to decision-making. Strategy building is one of the first and the most important actions of stakeholders involved in LAG.

In case of LAG I small area, consultations and stakeholders' direct participation in decision-making appeared to be a good approach. The process involved meetings with local societies in two stages (Local Development Strategy I, p.4-5): distributing information about the LAG; consultations with selected stakeholders (20-30 individuals). The first phase included information and educational meetings with approximately 500 participating farmers and entrepreneurs. Eighteen workshops focused on identifying local needs and entrepreneurship. Also, during the meetings, participants discussed opportunities for new actions and ideas for development (Local Development Strategy, p.14).

Stakeholders who identified themselves as knowledgeable or were considered as the most knowledgeable by other stakeholders were invited to further collaborate in the review of goals and suggested actions in LAG I. Also, the same stakeholders were invited to join LAG I. Such approach, however, might discriminate local 'newcomers' and those viewed as 'outsiders'.

Strategic goals were partially based on the surveys conducted between February-March 2008 during local meetings:

- farmers- 234 surveys

- entrepreneurs – 108 surveys
- gminas, non-governmental organizations, and churches – 7 surveys
- high school students- 98 surveys

LAG I organized a special unit providing stakeholders with information in one of the most accessible gminas. Also the LAG's website gives access to information about tourism in the areas (<http://www.kaszubylgd.pl>). The website became a forum for residents who wanted to express their ideas. However residents' feedback through the website is only one-way internet-based communication between and its LAG I participants and other local stakeholders. This form of interaction was the most applicable in the final stage of the local strategy document because of the least limitations. Additional channels of communication such as local and regional media were used to promote LAG I actions. Both the document of local development strategy and the website of LAG I highlight the egalitarian character of the LAG decision-making.

The first information about LEADER in the LAG II area was distributed by a few individuals active in local social structures (Local Development Strategy II, p. 93). The founders shared with each other the understanding of the idea of LAG during spontaneous meetings. Individuals, who in the beginning of LEADER expressed interest in the program gained better understanding of it through multiple workshops and trainings (Local Development Strategy II, p.93).

Many stakeholders joined the group in order to apply for the LEADER funding. More than 200 people represented 140 local entities in meetings and workshops regarding LAG II actions. Regardless of the initial enthusiasm of the stakeholders, the current number of participants and involvement in the LAG community is significantly lower.

LAG II revised the existing document of Local Development Strategy and the new strategy focused on meeting local needs. LAG II conducted survey in which stakeholders from 16 gminas were asked to propose changes. Almost 250 proposals (50 %) pointed at the need for funding small private business owners. This means that LAG II stakeholders requested more LEADER support for small initiatives.

Forms of communication regarding local development strategy included also personal contact with stakeholders, email, newsletter, and consultation regarding proposed projects or information on LAG II website (www.pds.org.pl). Also, local magazines became an important communication channel. LAG II made the attempt to create an environment that fosters interaction and stakeholders cooperation. This has facilitated stakeholders' engagement with available means and funding.

The Local Development Strategy III is based on Integrated Rural Development Strategy created in 2006. LAG III elected a group of stakeholders to coordinate the updating process. The participatory approach to the strategy building resulted in a first draft of the document. The goal of the meetings was to recognize different needs and views. Stakeholders could participate in meetings organized in each gmina. However, only some participants were invited to cooperate with experts on the final version of the strategy. They focused on adaptation of the document to the LEADER framework. Stakeholders' participation in the strategy building process consisted of three phases:

1. LAG III presented actions listed in the document
2. Local stakeholders working groups' analyzed availability of local resources in order to define development goals and possible projects
3. LAG III distributed a survey examining knowledge about and views of LEADER

At first glance the strategy and the building process aim at including views from different interest groups. Meetings, surveys, debates and consultations seemed to encourage interaction among stakeholders as well as increase their knowledge of the LEADER framework. However, at the time of the research Local Action Groups were new and evolving group of stakeholders that with further evolution of its current character should be continued.

4.3.4.2. Implementation

The quality of the strategy implementation will further implicate characteristics of community action. Transparency and access to information about implementation are the two main principles. The first task aimed at increasing stakeholders' involvement in tourism promotion and development. According to the Local Development Strategies, Local Action Groups' activities included:

- Annual reports available through LAGs websites
- Meetings and training with applicants for the LEADER funds
- Information on boards in town halls and other local authority buildings
- Media: announcements in local and regional press (newspapers and magazines); posters and fliers about LEADER and LAG I actions
- Each LAG has the Internet website with reports, projects' timetable, newsletter and etc.

Access to information is critical for the quality of the LEADER approach. Therefore, the LAGs' officers help residents who have questions or concerns regarding LEADER. The office staff provides stakeholders' with technical advice about the application process. Local communication and information channels facilitate interactions within the LEADER framework. On the other hand, better access to information about the LAG processes and the transparency of decision-making may improve perception of the LAG actions among stakeholders.

Providing only the general overview of implementation process, LAGs did not specify all tools the employed within the LEADER program. However the content of its website indicates that LAG adapt tools to current needs of local societies. Hence, the implementation of the local development strategy is a more flexible process.

Future attempts to update the document and adjust the implementation process to the current needs of the local society should additionally involve interviews, consultations with stakeholders and meetings. In addition, the evaluation of LEADER impacts will include surveys, meetings and consultations with local society (Local Development Strategy I, p. 88).

The analysis of the strategy document pointed out some differences between LAG I, LAG II and LAG III. The differences are often a result of the experience of local leaders and the character of LAGs actions. Tourism development within the LEADER framework connects various stakeholders. LEADER projects encourage the use of local resources embedded in relationships among stakeholders. It may have an impact on the stakeholders' perception of their contribution to the rural society wellbeing.

5. CHAPTER V: EMPOWERMENT IN LEADER

Chapter IV argued that tourism development within the LEADER framework in Pomerania facilitates empowerment at a community level by generating centers of local action (Local Action Groups). The hypothesis was proposed after the examination of archival documents and websites of the three Local Action Groups in the northern parts of Pomerania. Also, the chapter aimed at developing a socio-economic context for discussion of stakeholders' views of LEADER and Local Action Groups.

Information gathered from studying documents and websites allows only for limited understanding of the actual stakeholders' perception of empowerment in LEADER. The adequate consideration of empowerment in LEADER cannot rest solely on the information from secondary sources. For this study the face-to-face interviews with stakeholders were an essential source of knowledge about the perceived empowerment.

The face-to-face semi-structured interviews with tourism stakeholders increased the researcher's knowledge about the perceived character of tourism decision-making within the LEADER framework and the different views of LEADER and LAGs. Also the views of cultural and political environment articulated by the interviewees contributed to the interpretation of their statements. This chapter is organized according to the following main themes corresponding with the conceptual model:

- Social capital: understood as resources such as information and knowledge embedded in relationships between stakeholders
- Empowerment: viewed as understanding of socio-political systems that leads to perception of better socio-political control together with motivation and capacity to utilize individual and local resources

- Participatory tourism development: understood as participation in LAG actions, centers of interaction for the LEADER framework

These themes embrace the ideas of social relationships and resources embedded in those relationships, the concept of interactional communities, and stakeholders' empowerment through participatory tourism development. The following paragraphs build the narrative about LEADER and LAGs on the basis of subjective views provided by the interviewees. The juxtaposition of different views forms a bigger picture of the LEADER framework that emerged from the analysis of the interviews' transcripts. Organization of the chapter aims at highlighting the relation between the findings and the conceptual model proposed in Chapter 2.

5.1. Social Capital

Social relations are the essence of empowerment within the LEADER framework. They are an important source of information and may increase the access to other local resources. Also, a local network of social relationships may foster cooperation among rural stakeholders in the process of achieving common goals (Falk, 2000). However, whereas many stakeholders benefit from connecting with each other, others may feel excluded from the network and experience limited access to the local resources (Perking, Hughey and Speer, 2002). Evidence presented below indicates that personal relations between individuals who represent private, social and public sectors influenced access to resources and cooperation (e.g. LAG I, LAG II). For example, negative relations between the President of Local Tourism Organization and officials diminish the perceived value of his projects and decrease its chances to receive funding from the public sector.

On the other hand, Local Action Group III facilitates good relationships mainly between gmina officials (Authorities Representative, 9.19.2010) and any of these relationships have

turned into friendships (Social Representative, 9.2.2010). However, increasing isolation of LEADER participants within LAG structures leads to fewer opportunities for interaction and to develop relationships across local interests (e.g. LAG III). So far, the majority of officials in LAG III are members of the Decision Board, which is isolated from other LAG III units such as the Board for Rural Development program. Also, to date neither the LEADER framework nor actions of LAG III has shown to improve the relationship between private and social sectors. Consequently, LEADER may function to strengthen formerly established advantageous positions of officials in the local society but not the private sector.

The perspective of the LAG II Decision Board President is that the current and main challenges of LAG II include insufficient development of social relations. Local societies within that area are characterized by social and political apathy. Residents of villages that used to be included in collective farms, don't want involvement of associations and they demonstrate negative attitudes to cooperation:

“They are focused on taking and they believe that if they have many kids they deserve everything.” (Small Agriculture Owner, 9.2.2010),

These elements are expected to improve after LAG II implements interventions focused on improving the connectivity of local societies (President of LAG II Decision Board, 9.4.2010).

5.1.1. Access to resources

Familiarity among tourism stakeholders can significantly enhance their operation within LEADER framework through improving access to resources such as knowledge or information. For example, LAG I is characterized by strong familiarity among its stakeholders which improves distribution of information. The interviewed Owner of a Small Agritourism Business brought up ‘familiarity’ between LAG I members:

“Everyone here knows everyone. We knew each other before ... and only people who work for public sector are sometimes new for us. They however represent Mayors, who also have known each other for many years.” (Owner of a Small Agritourism Business, 10.10.2010)

Another interviewee (Restaurant Owner, 10.20.2010) added that some business owners remain in touch on a daily basis, outside the LEADER framework and activities related to tourism. They developed relationships a long time ago as a result of a common vision of the area. Residents who were born in the area and have known each other for many years constitute the majority of LAG I participants.

Interviewed stakeholders highlighted both positive and negative aspects of such ‘familiarity’ in LAG I. In general, familiarity between LAG participants is viewed as a positive feature, but sometimes it may lead to isolation of new tourism stakeholders and thereby it limits their access to local resources via LAG. Familiarity between current LAG I members is believed to sometimes limit participation in LAG I to stakeholders that hold similar views. As much as familiarity between the core participants may be limiting for excluded stakeholders, it still improves access to LAG I collective resources for those core members. Also, business owners who participate in LEADER have better access to the social sector (Farmer I, 7.27.2010; Son, 9.17.2010).

A Small Local Agriculture Owner’s cooperation within the LAG II community was a result of personal relationships with a representative of the Center for Agricultural Advice that led to professional relations with the Center staff (organization independent from LAG II). She became a trainer for a cooking workshop organized by the Centre for Agricultural Advice. She decided to participate in a workshop organized by LAG II in order to receive information about

its current activities. She believes that relationships developed within LAG II open new opportunities and they give access to new resources such as information, knowledge and funding. Also, an interviewed Small Accommodation Owner suggested that the new relationships are a valuable resource for her actions.

It is proposed in the model that access to information is linked to empowerment (see: Chapter 2, Zimmerman, 1995; Chapter 3). The main means of communication with LAGs participants are usually: the Internet, mail, and phone calls. Announcements in local newspapers became another main means to communicate with stakeholders (Director of the LAG II office, 8.11.2010). The Director of LAG I office stressed that in her LAG the most important means of communication and information distribution are email and mail. On the other hand phone calls are regarded the fastest way to share news and to contact stakeholders (Accommodation Owner, 08.31. 2010). For example, LAG I staff calls members of the Decision Board about emerging issues that require fast decisions (Accommodation Owner, 08.31. 2010).

In addition to the formal means to access information, word of mouth and weekly announcements in local churches appear to be a popular source of knowledge about local actions and LEADER (Father, 09.13.2010). All interviewees agreed that churches are important communication channels in rural regions of Poland. They help to distribute information to remote households.

In fact all interviewees from the private sector agreed that information about action is probably the most effectively distributed through word of mouth (e.g. LAG I). This is especially true in areas characterized by familiarity among tourism stakeholders.

“If people know each other well, they prefer to share information in person.” (Father, 09.13.2010)

Even the everyday interactions are the source of information about activities that mobilize stakeholders' individual resources. Usually LAGs aim at improving members' access to information. For example, LAG I organized a series of meetings in gminas and announcements about the meetings were published in newspapers and on the Internet websites of local governments. Those meetings are viewed as a learning process (Father, 09.13.2010). During these meetings participants exchanged ideas and share their experiences in tourism (Father, 09.13.2010):

“I always learn something while interacting with others” (Father, 09.13.2010)

The President of the Decision Board suggested that LAG II facilitates development of relationships that are necessary to mobilize stakeholders resources. Emerging as a group, tourism stakeholders can successfully pursue their interests outside LAG II yet they failed to do so (President of LAGII Decision Board, 09.04.2010). Instead, better access to information about LAG actions has become a high priority for them (Director of the LAG II office, 08.11.2010). In order to become more accessible to stakeholders the organization runs two offices: the main office in the Northern part of the region and the supporting office in the Southern part. The initiative should demonstrate that stakeholders from southern parts of the region are equally important for the organization (Director of the LAG II office, 08.11.2010). Conversely, the interviewed Farmer claimed LAG II does not pursue any particular action focused on fostering local relationships.

An important and desirable impact of LEADER is that it improves stakeholders' access to funding opportunities such opportunities also appear the main purpose of stakeholders' interaction within the LEADER framework. Earlier, availability of funding encouraged LAG II

founding members to cooperation focused on creation of Local Action Group (Director of LAG II office).

Training is another resource for participants in LAGs. However, Small Local Agritourism Owner, who has participated in LAG II for one year, noted that access to training is not equal for all the members. She views the current criteria for participation in LAG's training as unfair and unjustified. Availability of training and benefiting from various workshops depends on location and the reach of many projects is limited to only some towns and regions. According to the Director of the LAG II office, LAG II attempts to improve stakeholders' access to offered training and workshops.

In LAG III relationships between officials lead to the exchange of experience among officials from different gminas regarding LEADER, exchange of their expert knowledge and mutual support in overcoming program's procedural difficulties. Officials increase the community overall capacity to deal with LEADER (Miller & Campbell, 2006; Zimmerman, 1995).

“I always say that there is surplus value in the LEADER such as friendships which developed. In general, we rarely cooperate on an everyday basis.” (Authorities Representative, 09.19.2010)

In conclusion, LAGs can become a rich source of various resources for stakeholders from the private and social sectors as well as officials who represent local authorities in LEADER by improving interaction between representatives of private and public sectors .

5.1.2. Relationships developed within the LEADER framework

Chapter IV pointed out that LAGs show overall features in common with those of interactional fields (Wilkinson, 1991). However, one of the major constraints to view LAG fields

as a community action was the lack of common identity among participants (especially in case of LAG II and LAG III). Low identity was found to limit development of social relationships and reduces the success of joint actions (Social Representative, 09.2.2010; Director of LAG II office, 08.11.2010; the President of LAG II Decision Board, 09.04.2010). Evidence suggested residents need time before elements of common identity develop.

“This land was inhabited after the World War II. People came from different regions and have not developed a common identity and they don’t have a tradition to cooperate. These lands were all collective farms. In result people feel entitled to everything and do not give anything in return. People seem to need more time and good examples and LEADER is an example of this.”(Social Representative, 09.2.2010)

The problem of weak identity is only relevant when discussing LAG II and LAG III. In LAG I interaction and cooperation reflect the character of relationships pursued outside the LEADER framework. Also experiences of past cooperation and joint actions influence the current participation in LEADER. For example the interviewed owner of accommodation facility in the area noted that his involvement in local organizing and participation in associations encouraged him to participate in LAG I (Accommodation Owner, 08.31. 2010).

Positive interactions within LAG I impact relations outside the group. Several interviewees highlighted that they and others they know remain in touch with each other beyond LEADER (Small Agritourism Owner, 09.02.2010). Some stakeholders have developed an individual business relationship outside Local Action Group I. For example Father (09.13.2010), who is an owner of accommodation cooperates with other local business such as catering. The interviewed Father and Son believe they have better access to other local entrepreneurs because

of the participation in the LAG structures. Also, the interviewed owner of a small agritourism facility (Small Agritourism Owner, 09.02.2010) stays in touch with LAG participants who are involved in other local associations. However, in addition she developed new relationships with LAG I office staff. Participants that are less familiar with other members have more opportunities to develop new relationships. During, the workshop for future leaders organized by LAG II in 2009, the Small Local Agriculture Owner began a social relationship with the interviewed Farmer, as they both agree that people with new ideas are needed (Small Local Agriculture Owner, 09.06.2010; Farmer II, 08.05.2010). She also developed positive relationships with the LAG officers.

Interviewees pointed out opportunities they had multiple opportunities developed new local relationships due to participation in Local Action Groups. However, new to LAG I area the owner of a local tourism and recreation facility stresses her occupation with visitors that limits her opportunities to build a social network with other LAG members. Also, skeptical local Artists expressed concern about the fact that many stakeholders had been already strongly engaged in the group before its transformation into LAG I.

Relations among officials were found to influence formal cooperation and the overall performance of LAGs. For example former conflict between gminas and the president of LAG III reduced members' efforts to complete projects. Also, personal relationships developed between officials influence the image of gminas represented by them. Opinions about one gmina representative impact the perception of the whole gmina (Social Representative, 09.2.2010; Authorities Representative, 09.19.2010).

In case of LAG III, stakeholders from the private sector are afraid to cooperate with officials because they don't trust in their good intentions (Authorities Representative,

09.19.2010) . On the other hand, the gmina welcomes cooperation with the social sector.

LEADER could have a positive influence on cooperation between the public and private sector by building trusting relationships with officials and thereby empowering those stakeholders within the LAG.

5.1.3. Changing character of relationships

As mentioned above, the familiarity and formerly established close relationships between the core stakeholders might lead to perception of its discriminatory character by non-members. For non-members association with current members may boost their interest on cooperation with a LAG. Personal connections are an effective means to motivate tourism stakeholders to participate in LAG (Tour Guide, 09. 31. 2010).

Interviewees provided several interesting comments highlighting the link between quality of public-private cooperation and the character of their interactions within LAG. There is no doubt that the degree of familiarity among stakeholders from different sectors impacts the character of Local Action Group. For the Local Artist local officials were the main source of information about LEADER and his past cooperation with officials influenced his current, rather negative views of the LAG:

“My cooperation with them began only because they needed gifts, and came to me to buy souvenirs made from antlers. They would buy them when representatives of local governments were delegated abroad.” (Local Artist, 09.01.2010)

The stakeholders, who had relationships with public sector representatives, were first invited to join LAG (Father, 09.13.2010). Its President invited the interviewed Tour Guide to cooperate in development of local maps. The relationship between the President and the Tour

Guide developed and cooperation with local authorities continued within the LEADER framework. Nowadays, the tour guide feels he is an important stakeholder in the organization. Five other interviewed stakeholders also received personal invitations from local authorities to participate in LAG I. The findings suggest that personal invitations are a good way to foster individual empowerment.

Small Local Agriculture Owner and Farmer II suggested limited involvement among rural residents was due to a persistent lack of trust in officials and local activists.

“People do not see that they can also benefit from cooperation with entrepreneurial person.” (Small Local Agriculture Owner, 09.06.2010)

“Residents just watch passively”. (Farmer II, 08.05.2010)

This study did not explore activity of local stakeholders outside LAGs. For example residents in local villages may not want to cooperate with ‘outsiders’ who represent a larger LAG area (Small Local Agriculture Owner, 09.06.2010). The Small Local Agriculture Owner reported that cooperation in her village is challenging. She is unable to collaborate with other women, develop relations with them or gain their interest in LAG II actions. Women in the village hold hostile attitudes, which has discouraged the Small Local Agriculture Owner. Her attitude accurately reflects views of a whole group of stakeholders who did not succeed in cooperation with other villagers:

“They are doing their thing – I am doing my thing” (Small Local Agriculture Owner, 09.06.2010)

The findings from the interviews suggest consideration of the following factors that co-defining the character of current relationship. First of all the character of interactions between community members outside LAGs can impact the quality of interactions between them in

LEADER. Secondly, the cooperation between local stakeholders during early transition the may have an impact on current cooperation within the LEADER framework. Finally, local context that consists of former experiences of social and political systems may have significant impact on differences between qualities of current relationships in different LAGs. These are meaningful findings that demonstrate how factors external to and independent from LEADER may decide about its success in different areas of Pomerania.

5.2. Empowerment

Empowerment is a significant concept in the proposed model. However, it cannot be understood separately from other categories such as development of social relationships. This study gathered sufficient evidence only to suggest that empowerment is not an independent construct. Rather it should be understood and interrelated or linked to the past and present relations in Pomerania. Stakeholders' perception of their role in tourism planning is the first of several interconnected themes identified during the interviews as empowerment was defined in the second chapter.

5.2.1. Stakeholders' perception of their role in tourism planning

Along with changing economic and political environments the character of stakeholders' participation in local associations and their mobilization has evolved. LAG I is an example of a tourism marketing organization, which transformed and changed the role of the private sector in decision-making process.

Two interviewees noted the difference between the current and past character of stakeholders' participation in LAG I tourism actions (Father, 09.13.2010; Accommodation Owner, 08.31. 2010). Father I claimed that, nowadays participants aren't as mobilized and active as they used to be during early transition stage. He added that even when mobilization of rural

resources revolved mainly around local authorities, stakeholders were still enthusiastic to cooperate with each other.

Promotion of events and local attractions that promoted travel were important marketing tool and stakeholders participated in a variety of events in Poland and outside the country (Accommodation Owner, 08.31. 2010). Tourism events used to be viewed in the region as a form of promotion and people were highly enthusiastic about them. Nowadays tourism promotion happens mainly through the Internet and ‘word of mouth’. Stakeholders don’t understand the benefits from promotion through local organizations (Accommodation Owner, 08.31. 2010; Tour Guide, 09.31. 2010). Less cooperation in this field of action leads to less interaction among tourism stakeholders and their different role in LAG I. Interviewees recognized that current ‘social apathy’ is a significant barrier to social development in post-communist rural areas (Small Agritourism Owner, 09.02.2010; Farmer II, 08.05.2010; Social Representative, 09.2.2010; Authorities Representative, 09.19.2010).

In this post-communist setting, stakeholders may also restrain from participation in development processes if they believe that the public sector remains the leader and the roles of business and social sectors in Local Action Groups are rather unclear. The main opportunity for cross-sectoral interactions are still the LAGs meetings. However, due to familiarity its participants may find it difficult to recognize who represents the social sector and who represents the business sector and therefore may do not recognize each other’s roles as representatives of particular interests.

For many stakeholders, the main incentive to participate in LAG I is availability of funding. Once the distribution of funds is completed, it is expected that those stakeholders will loose interest in LAG I actions (Accommodation Owner, 08.31. 2010; Farmer I, 07.27.2010).

There is a possibility that others who no longer need capital from LEADER may stay active in their villages.

“Possibly they will be active in the small fields they created with money from LAG – but not necessarily more than that” (Accommodation Owner, 08.31.2010)

For example, the interviewed owner of small agritourism business (Owner of Small Agritourism Business, 09.10.2010) participated in the local tourism organization but she is no longer active in LAG I and instead she is more active in her village.

Participation in multiple local associations and cooperation with local authorities leads to more positive perceptions of one’s role in LAG processes. The Tour Guide used to help local authorities and the local tourism organization to promote the area. Nowadays he is involved in LAG I because he has a positive view of LEADER and wants to continue cooperation with officials.

It was discovered that some stakeholders may feel uncertain of their role in LEADER. The interviewed stakeholder who just recently joined the LAG also has a positive view of cooperation between LEADER participants (New Accommodation Owner, 08.31.2010). She is new in the area and she realized that she needs support from a tourism-focused organization. From her point of view her role in LEADER and her contribution is so far insignificant, but LAG I provides sufficient support for tourism in the area (New Accommodation Owner, 08.31.2010). She feels that other members respect her role in the group.

“With the group I just needed someone I could ask for different things- to have a starting point – and the group fulfilled its role” (New Accommodation Owner, 08.31.2010)

Others regard themselves as local leaders and they want to be active. A small agritourism owner (Small Agritourism Owner, 09.02.2010) knew LAG I officers and she joined LAG I because she needed support for development of tourism attractions in her village. The entire village benefits from her projects that LAG I agreed to pursue:

“After we got involved in LAG we were pushing LAG office to add something to this area something like Nordic Walking. And they knew that we cared about it and they wrote a project. Now we have a Nordic Walking trail. My husband was helping too.” (Small Agritourism Owner, 09.02.2010)

The interviewed Small Agritourism Owner (09.02.2010) wants to apply for available funding and participate in other LAG activities. She acts as an advocate of tourism in her village and she is focused on promotion of valuable tourism resources.

Whereas some stakeholders disengage from LAG I others want to stay active and try to inspire newcomers to the area:

“We can inspire people to some behaviors so that the area is more integrated; this is why this entire tourism infrastructure is developed. This is why Local Action Group creates trails and implements other projects. We want to get the local society interested; create groups which in turn would get attention from tourists.” (Restaurant Owner, 09.20.2010)

The Restaurant Owner believes that she was invited to participate in LAG I because she is one of the most active and knowledgeable residents. She feels important and remains loyal to her colleagues in LAG I. From her perspective the core stakeholders, like her have relevant knowledge about the area and they represent different local interests:

“I’ve worked here 17 years and I know everything about the business sector here. We were chosen because we were the only stakeholders available, but we are somehow respected or liked in this local society”
(Restaurant Owner, 09.20.2010)

Also the interviewed Son expressed a very similar approach to his role in LAG and he added that being elected by other stakeholders makes him view himself as a representative of local needs.

“In LEADER I am as the representative of local society, because from the beginning I was chosen by local society instead of being invited by the President of LAG I” (Farmer II, 08.05.2010)

Participation in LAG I is a social service and it does not benefit him directly:

“This is social work. We do not work only for us but we work for entire region” (Son, 09.17.2010)

Furthermore the interviewed Restaurant Owner saw mainly positive outcomes of her actions within LAG I. This interviewee felt that she represents views and needs of all small businesses:

“Yes (I see positive outcomes of my participation), I represent people who have their business. I don’t have problems to communicate my ideas and when I see that other participants have a better idea than I, I don’t have a problem to accept it and support it. But sometimes they like my ideas ...I like the dynamics in this group” (Restaurant Owner, 09.20.2010)

In reality, small businesses need to experience positive changes or otherwise they remain skeptical about the effects of LAG actions (Father, 09.13.2010). Without evidence stakeholders will not understand positive LEADER impacts and may disapprove of LAG's action:

“They waste money for workshops and training, but nothing comes out in result for the participants” (Local Artist, 09.01.2010)

“Maybe I am not interested enough but I don't feel effects of this groups activities” (Local Artist, 09.01.2010)

Others are not interested in active participation in LAG because their goals are different. They don't understand how they can achieve their goals through participation in LEADER. Therefore LAG I needs to promote the positive effects of its activities (Son, 09.17.2010):

“As a member of LAG I, I want to receive information about how many fliers were distributed and to whom and on what occasion” (Son, 09.17.2010)

However, negative views of LAG actions may nurture stakeholders' skepticism about their role in LEADER. For example, two interviewees believed LAG I was represented local authorities instead of people's needs (e.g. Skeptic, 08.28.2010; Local Artist, 09.01.2010).

Negative personal experiences of dealing with officials may also be linked to the stakeholders misunderstanding of negative perceptions of their role in the community.

“Leaders of LAG I needed me and my art as 'gifts' for visiting officials. When I didn't want to give away my art and they stopped being interested in supporting local art. We (folk artists) were supposed to benefit and only once some flier about us was released and this website – unchanged for many years” (Local Artist, 09.01.2010)

Local authorities are welcomed in LAG I because they can contribute funds to LAG actions, while business owners and other residents appear as less valuable members.

“LAG focused on local government offices- they wanted local governments to become members because they pay higher fee” (Local Artist, 09.01.2010)

Some stakeholders in LAG II participate because they understand the benefits. Participation gives access to solutions developed for the entire group (President of local tourism organization, 09.14.2010). Whereas some believe that their values are similar to the values represented by LAG members they may need more education about LEADER (e.g. Small Local Agriculture Owner, 09.06.2010). The Small Local Agriculture Owner chose LAG II because it is active in tourism. She observed the LAG community for five years before she decided to join the group. The Small Local Agriculture Owner (09.06.2010) recognized that her values are similar to those represented by LAG II. Being a new participant, she is enthusiastic and very active in order to later become a recognized member. She trusts that after her proposal receives funding from LEADER, she will gain respect among other stakeholders (Small Local Agriculture Owner, 09.06.2010). Regardless of her current role in LAG II, she recognizes herself as:

“ (...) an ambassador of people and institutions and things that are developing” (Small Local Agriculture Owner, 09.06.2010).

Farmer II became an active participant in LAG because he was looking for an alternative setting to cooperate and LAG II seemed the appropriate place to act upon his needs. Farmer II viewed himself as an active stakeholder and he wanted to participate in all workshops and training organized by the LAG for local leaders. He believed that he

received an invitation to join the LAG to cooperate within the LEADER structure. He expressed a satisfaction that his ideas about promoting local viewpoints were welcomed by officials (Farmer II, 08.05.2010). Authorities being supportive of his ideas increased his enthusiasm about his future role in LEADER. However, currently he lost his sense of belonging with activists because he felt disregarded by the attitude of the core stakeholders in LAG II.

Stakeholders from the private sector that hope to play an important role in LAG II may be disappointed (e.g. Farmer II, 08.05.2010; Small Local Agriculture Owner, 09.06.2010). They may view themselves as local leaders but they may feel that their initiative is neglected and they are asked to be involved in meaningless activities. For example Farmer II believes gminas are the main recipients of support from LEADER as opposed to local leaders:

“Local activists hoped for more funding for their actions. Instead Local Action Groups support the interests of local officials.” (Farmer II, 08.05.2010)

Whereas authorities pursue projects regardless of local needs, LAG was expected to coordinate bottom-up independent initiatives and collaboration between stakeholders from different sectors. Farmer II is the only one of many stakeholders who expressed disappointment with LAG’s inefficiency and servitude to authorities. LAGs are no longer perceived as an independent group of mobilized stakeholders focused on tourism development, but rather they are viewed as a tool for local authorities (Social Representative, 09.02.2010).

On the one hand the gmina perceives its role as the facilitator of bottom-up actions. On the other hand, misinforming stakeholders may diminish their role in LEADER because they are more likely to miss opportunities for funding their ideas (President of Local Tourism

Organization, 09.14.2010). A representative of local authorities thinks that **the** private sector stakeholders may feel that they wouldn't be able to meaningfully contribute to public and social sector activities and therefore they show little concern about LEADER. Although stakeholders understand that LEADER provides funding, they don't see how they can benefit from individual projects. LAG III also emphasized that officials find it problematic to motivate private sector stakeholders to engage in actions initiated by gminas.

The perceived role in LEADER and a LAG appears to be an important element of stakeholders' feelings of empowerment. Those LAG members who don't see how they could make their role more meaningful in LEADER felt discouraged and develop passive attitudes. There should be no doubt that the self-perceived role in LEADER is linked to the perception of control over outcomes of decision-making discussed in the following section. The section below explores the perception of control in the decision-making process within the LEADER framework.

5.2.2. Stakeholders perception of control over outcomes of tourism decision-making

Perception of control is an important element of empowerment and it may be revealed as a stakeholders' self-efficacy. Several stakeholders (Small Agritourism Owner, 09.02.2010; Tour Guide, 09.31. 2010; Skeptic, 08.28.2010; Local Artist, 09.01.2010) highlighted that private relationships between LAG officials and stakeholders from the private sector may influence the process of decision-making that involves local authorities (Tour Guide, 09.31. 2010). These types of decisions are usually made outside formal meetings (Skeptic, 08.28.2010). For example the Tour Guide (09.31. 2010) described how the owner of a local museum met with the president of LAG I to discuss its support for events organized by the museum. In addition, many decisions

regarding gminas are often made before the Decision Board meetings and therefore these meetings became just a formality (Skeptic, 08.28.2010).

Stakeholders who limit participation in LAG to general meetings may not be aware of current LAG actions. For example the interviewed owner of a stable and agritourism business usually participates in general meetings. She stays disengaged because of time constraints. She believes that other stakeholders have more time and stay more engaged (Owner of Small Agritourism Business, 09.10.2010). Also, from her perspective decisions are made already before meetings and she has no actual impact on decision-making in LAG I.

The interviewees, who had a positive view of participation in LAG and felt they were important, also felt that it also gives them more control over the outcome of tourism decision-making (e.g. Tour Guide, 09.31. 2010; Accommodation Owner, 08.31. 2010; Small Local Agriculture Owner, 09.06.2010). For example, Tour Guide (09.31. 2010) was at the time of this study a member of the committee that evaluates applications for small projects. He was proud that he supported a project focused on the construction of a sidewalk, because he found it necessary. Participation in evaluating proposals seemed to have improved his perceived control and competence (intrapersonal component of empowerment), The Director of LAG II office (08.11.2010) pointed out that in LAG some committees consists of public sector representatives. This may lead some stakeholders to the belief in purposeful exclusion of private and social sectors from a committee. On the other hand, the President of the Decision Board (09.04.2010) points out that past attempts to build a committee made up of private sector stakeholders were unsuccessful. LAG III did not create any evaluation committees as members of the Board for Rural Development Program to evaluate the project proposals.

A few interviewed stakeholders who developed relationships with officials claimed they were able to influence outcomes of decision-making before they even joined LAG (e.g. The president of LAG II Decision Board, 09.04.2010; Accommodation Owner, 09.06.2010; Restaurant Owner, 09.20.2010; Small Local Agriculture Owner, 09.06.2010). For example the Accommodation Owner (09.06.2010) believes he has had an impact on outcomes of decision-making. He also believes that LAG I motivates participants with different views. The decision-making procedures enable him to equally participate in evaluations of proposals. He demonstrated a high level of self-efficacy and confidence in his abilities to control the local environment. In addition, a few participants expressed the opinion that stakeholders who cooperated with LAG from its beginnings should be rewarded by having more control over outcomes of decision-making (Tour Guide, 09.31. 2010; Accommodation Owner, 09.06.2010; New Accommodation Owner, 08.31.2010; Small Agritourism Owner, 09.06.2010).

The study depicted a few negative perceptions of the decision-making process within LEADER framework. Whereas each representative has its ‘turf’ to protect (its interest), local authorities are more powerful and it is easier for them to benefit from LEADER. In such circumstances, given double votes during meetings of the Decision Board, local authorities no longer need to acknowledge participation of the private and social sector (LAG I).

“Recently the local authorities received double votes – that doubled their power to push through ideas/projects” (Son, 09.17.2010)

On the one hand large tourism infrastructure projects can be effectively and quickly implemented. On the other hand a double vote to local authorities gave them almost the absolute control over the outcome of tourism decision-making process (Restaurant Owner, 09.20.2010).

Most of the time, the ideas from private and social sectors are welcomed, but projects from local authorities are more likely to receive funding (Skeptic, 08.28.2010; Son, 09.17.2010; Father, 09.13.2010; Local Artist, 09.01.2010). Officials advance politically expectant projects in lieu of those projects deemed desirable by residents, reinforce the ignorance of the public sector to goals of the private and social sectors (The President of Local Tourism Organization; 09.14.2010).

“Local authorities do not listen to what people want – they don’t ask people” (The President of Local Tourism Organization, 09.14.2010).

Unlike LAG I all stakeholders officially have an equal vote in LAG III. Also, the public sector creates the ideal environment in which the private sector implements their projects (Butler, 2005). However, officials in LAG III expect private stakeholders to support public ideas for local development (Social Representative, 09.02.2010). No criticism of public sector projects is accepted from representatives of the private and social sector (Son, 09.17.2010; Owner of Small Agritourism Business, 09.10.2010):

“When local authorities discuss a project then they usually discuss ready proposals ... the way these proposals are presented to LAG I forum shows that LAG I and local authorities already planned their implementation- if I try to disagree it does not count because they have more votes” (Son, 09.17.2010)

Participation in strategy building were the main processes in which stakeholders are expected to control outcomes of decision-making. Indeed, Farmer I (07.27.2010) believes that stakeholders had the necessary skills and knowledge to address issues during public meetings and workshops. Stakeholders worked with enthusiasm and they worked on different concepts in

strategy building (Tour Guide, 09.31.2010). They significantly influenced the document of local strategy:

“Perhaps there were experts who wrote it down but the data and information were ours [stakeholders]. I think [...] people included what they wanted also in the proposed projects.” (Farmer I, 07.27.2010)

“Discussions have been intense and creative” (Tour Guide, 09.31. 2010).

However, the Skeptic, Local Artist and Son hold quite opposite views claiming that in LAG I participants didn't have impact on strategy decision-making or that few participating enthusiasts were asked to accept the proposed strategy. The Skeptic for example felt excluded from decision-making process due to his past personal conflicts with officials. As such Skeptic did not receive an invitation for meetings regarding the LEADER program. .

An interesting point made by the interviewees is that local authorities dominate meetings of LAGs (especially LAG I and LAG III) (Owner of Small Agritourism Business, 09.10.2010; Skeptic, 08.28.2010; Small Agritourism Owner, 09.02.2010; Farmer II, 08.05.2010; Local Artist, 09.01.2010). In LAG III, the private sector is excluded from essential decision-making because officials don't regard them as valuable partners (Social Representative, 09.02.2010). Some stakeholders from the private sector felt that they couldn't express their ideas (Owner of Small Agritourism Business, 09.10.2010; Small Agritourism Owner, 09.02.2010; Farmer II, 08.05.2010). Differences in capacity to act and skills between private sector and local authorities appear to discourage participation (Son, 09.17.2010; Social Representative, 09.02.2010). The Director of LAG II office pointed at estrangement of the private sector stakeholders. Private sector stakeholders seem unable to identify benefits that occur to local society with betterment of their individual situation. They are working alone and not as a group. They show little or no

interest in projects pursued by LAG II that aim at the wellbeing of the community. Also, public sector projects often gain little interest from private and social sectors.

“People are driven where they can see themselves benefiting. People don’t see how projects implemented by gminas can benefit them indirectly as they continue to perceive distance between gminas and themselves”

(Director of the LAG II office, 08.11.2010)

The section provided evidence about perceived control of decision-making within LEADER Framework. Stakeholders hold different beliefs of their actual impact on LAGs decisions and those beliefs relate to many other characteristics such as the past or present relations with local authorities. Given the undeniable role of officials in the overall perception of control over LAG decision-making process. The following section is concerned with stakeholders’ overall understanding of surrounding social and political systems.

5.2.3. Understanding of social and political systems

Local authorities are the component of political and social systems that was brought up by all interviewees. Stakeholders’ understanding of the role of authorities within the LEADER framework appear to be linked to their personal relationships with officials:

“My understanding of the local governments hasn’t changed as a result of participation in LAG because a lot of my family members work for the public sector and I am close to local authorities. I think other’s perceptions may have changed ... some may have seen local governments as units operating somewhere within local space but here in LAG they have direct contact with them and can discuss issues” (Son, 09.17.2010)

Good relationships with officials built their confidence in the decision-making process and drive cooperation between public and private sectors within the LEADER framework:

“In gminas everything depends on the wojt and the mayor. With some of them I can cooperate right now, with others not” (Accommodation Owner, 08.31.2010)

Some stakeholders demonstrated rather negative views about local authorities. The Skeptic suggests that officials think they know best how to deal with local issues and they only welcome contributions from stakeholders who they already knew. Perhaps this is why some stakeholders were prone to believe that the wealthiest residents control LEADER (Local Artist, 09.01.2010; Skeptic, 08.28.2010). For the most part in all three LAGs officials remain tourism development leaders. The private sector has an opportunity only to contribute through small projects (Farmer II, 08.05.2010).

According to the Local Artist many stakeholders from the private sector have to employ experts for writing applications in order to receive funding from the Marshall’s Office. Stakeholders who don’t want or cannot pay for ‘an expert’ stay disengaged with LAG and don’t benefit from LEADER (Local Artist, 09.01.2010). The overall view of the public sector may be summarized by the following quote:

“Officials are nice people but nothing comes out from any attempts to cooperate” (New Accommodation Owner, 08.31.2010)

Furthermore, project proposals that were submitted by local authorities were reviewed by members of a review committee as well as discussed during special meetings of the LAG I Decision Board. The committee members were not allowed to evaluate proposals from their

gmina. Members outside the committee can raise concerns regarding projects and clear procedures help stakeholders to understand the evaluation process:

“The process is relatively fair [...] evaluation procedures are clear. There isn’t much flexibility” (Accommodation Owner, 09.20.2010)

However, many stakeholders don't understand LEADER procedures at the regional level (in the Marshal's Office). Smaller stakeholders may be afraid to apply for LEADER funding, as they believe that potential benefits are not worth effort during the application process as well as they LEADER is not worth mobilization of their resources. Procedures at the regional level appear to be the main constraint to effective LAGs. They don't fit the local context and they limit LAG flexibility within the LEADER framework. None of the procedures surprise officials but residents are discouraged (Authorities Representative, 09.19.2010). Local gossip about the Marshal Office being in control of selecting projects for funding from LEADER frightens potential program participants. The following quotes from Farmer I is a good example of how stakeholders from the private sector view the input of regional authorities:

“The goal of LEADER is to evaluate application in terms of merits and content – evaluation of formal criteria is in the Marshall's Office –and the problem is right there. They (the Office) have simultaneously run other EU funding programs –the same as the Agency for Restructuring Agriculture- and everyone there is under control– some sort of competition. A lot of applicants gave up and withdrew their application because formalities were not worth it.” (Farmer I, 07.27.2010)

“People treat this strategy like their own but maybe they get a little bit discouraged by filling out papers. Because if it had been known ahead of time people could have prepared” (Farmer I, 07.27.2010)

“I think it should be working, it should be a healthy system, but I also thought it would be easier” (Farmer I, 07.27.2010)

Another problem with the current system is the long process of proposal evaluation. This extended process disqualifies soft projects (e.g. events) that need prompt response.

“Before some applications are evaluated, planned projects are outdated— but this is not a fault of local governments. Local governments only participate in the evaluation of proposals as members of LAG I. At the local level the evaluation process is very fair and there are no pressures.” (Farmer I, 07.27.2010)

General lack of knowledge about LEADER procedures favors those stakeholders who have better access to information through connections to local and regional authorities (Local Artist, 09.01.2010; Skeptic, 08.28.2010; Farmer II, 08.05.2010). Complicated procedures lead to cooperation with private consultants (self-proclaimed experts) that increase the overall cost of application for LEADER funding.

One popular belief held by some among the interviewees was that, as long as money is available within LEADER framework, some local stakeholders make attempts to control distribution of funds in order to increase private economic benefits from the program (Local Artist, 09.01.2010; Skeptic, 08.28.2010; Farmer II, 08.05.2010). Skeptic for example pointed out that officials in one gmina usually hire befriended companies from a surrounding gmina in order

to build tourism infrastructure for LEADER. Several core stakeholders appear to be aware of and accept officials' sense of entitlement to personal gains from LEADER funding (for example Accommodation Owner, 08.31.2010; Restaurant Owner, 09.20.2010). Skeptic (08.28.2010) and Local Artist (09.01.2010) stressed that mayors can and do reduce a property tax for individual stakeholders to influence residents' views (Skeptic, 08.28.2010) and others aren't bothered by this state of local affairs.

Existing regional tourism development plans based on outdated information about the size of tourism activities became inadequate to define current circumstances (Social Representative, 09.02.2010; Authorities Representative, 09.19.2010). For example in LAG III officials think that information about LEADER is insufficient. They feel unable to accurately plan development within the LEADER framework. Older generations demonstrate even less knowledge about the current system, and therefore are less supportive of LEADER. Misunderstanding and lack of information about the idea of LEADER either creates the perception of the program as just another intervention from the EU officials (Authorities Representative, 09.19.2010) or it leads to high expectations that cannot be met by local authorities (Social Representative, 09.02.2010; Authorities Representative, 09.19.2010).

The President of the Local Tourism Organization noted that local authorities tend to compete with the social sector. They provide different associations with funding to be able to control their actions. Associations can either agree to depend upon local authorities or compete with them. In addition Farmer II was convinced that local associations act as servants of local authorities. He believes that some gminas may try to compete with the private sector by getting involved in activities traditionally reserved for private sector. In addition to this, officials in LAG III agreed to the distribution of the LEADER funds to gminas without evaluating their project

proposals. The intention of such arrangements was to assure that each gmina benefits. However, the private sector is given priority in accessing funding for ‘small projects’, which will be distributed to small-scale initiatives (Authorities Representative, 09.19.2010). Given the advantages of gminas, this competition often eliminates private entrepreneurs diminishing efforts of the LAG community to encourage stakeholders’ action. LAGs need to be more pro-active and more incentives are needed for stakeholders from the the private sector (Son, 09.17.2010). The Restaurant Owner noted that limited funds for private sector, and initiatives competing with the private sector could lead to the disappearance of small business in rural areas.

However, neither the dependence upon officials nor the competition with authorities would ever lead to more effective actions. Only, cooperation between the private and public can secure sufficient mobilization of local society and ensure community development as well as new developments in the area. In the current circumstances the need to compete with local authorities discourages the private sector and limits bottom-up initiatives.

Political relations determine decisions at the regional level and often block implementation of bottom-up initiatives:

“For example, an incompetent person will say “I don’t like it” and this is how a project proposal gets rejected. These ladies there behave as if they were the most important” (the President of LAG II Decision Board, 09.04.2010).

Furthermore, officials in LAG II want to gain political supporters rather than to improve relationships between private and public sectors. LEADER changed power relations in many areas by increasing independence of LAGs from funding by local authorities. While it remains dependent on cooperation with officials, LAG II gained financial independence (President of

LAG II Decision Board, 09.04.2010). Stakeholders who understand the new character of cooperation with the public sector are more enthusiastic about engagement in LAGs actions.

On the other hand, gminas don't listen to advice coming from the private sector and officials rarely consult projects with local associations (The President of Local Tourism Organization, 09.14.2010). Never, have officials felt any need to discuss tourism decisions with representatives of the private sector. However, officials usually don't have knowledge about the role of tourism in local economy:

“There is little or no thinking about tourism development as an economic engine in many other areas. No one was willing to participate in workshop about tourism and they don't know what “building tourism product” is really about (President of Local Tourism Organization, 09.14.2010)

In addition, officials in LAG II lack a common vision of the area and knowledge about opportunities within LEADER. Authorities misunderstand the principles of LEADER and its process of decision-making. Some officials feel unable to coordinate implementation of the approach and powerless when facing administration of the program at the regional level (Authorities Representative, 09.19.2010; Social Representative, 09.02.2010). Due to a lack of experience with managing EU programs such as LEADER, both regional and local officials unintentionally create the additional barriers to LEADER's implementation (President of Local Tourism Organization, 09.14.2010). Public sector limits its activities to development of legal framework for the stakeholders operation. Stakeholders who expected more support for their projects are disappointed (Social Representative, 09.02.2010). Instead less knowledgeable officials in LAG III create additional formal procedures that may reduce positive impact of

LEADER. Hence, by many LEADER is perceived as another unnecessary element of this organizational structure (Social Representative, 09.02.2010).

5.2.4. Perception of Local Action Groups

Residents who had a more positive view of LAG's and their quality as local centers for interaction between stakeholders' may be more motivated to participate in LEADER. The following section seeks to illustrate how stakeholders view Local Action Groups, their origins and the area in which they operate. For example such views are revealed in stakeholder's stories about LAGs.

The area of LAG I actions has been known as '*Kashubs' Switzerland*' (Restaurant Owner, 09.20.2010). The area is unique in the region because of its landscape and tradition. All of the interviewees emphasized the entrepreneurial character of this land as well as the tradition of small entrepreneurs in private sector that existed regardless of economic and social oppressions during communism. The private initiatives bloomed during the early stages of political and economic transition (Farmer I, 07.27.2010; Accommodation Owner, 08.31. 2010)

LAG I was created as a result of cooperation between several tourism stakeholders connected to local public sector (Restaurant Owner, 09.20.2010; Accommodation Owner, 08.31. 2010; Skeptic, 08.28.2010; Local Artist, 09.01.2010). Stakeholders connected to the president of LAG I were regarded its founders, and nowadays they are core members supporting it.

The interviewees (Farmer I, 07.27.2010; Restaurant Owner, 09.20.2010; Accommodation Owner, 08.31. 2010) viewed LAG I as a hybrid organization that in addition to its responsibilities for tourism development gained new responsibilities when it joined LEADER. LAG I is considered to be the most influential group responsible for local tourism activities and cross-sectoral cooperation. Many residents may view LAG I as a center for tourism related

interaction (Father, 09.13.2010; Son, 09.17.2010; Restaurant Owner, 09.20.2010; Accommodation Owner, 08.31. 2010; New Accommodation Owner, 08.31.2010)

In addition to rather poor cooperation between the private and public sectors within LEADER, recently noted challenges include weakening relationships within the private sector. For example, the interviewees suggested limited interactions between young residents might be one of the causes (Restaurant Owner, 09.20.2010; Accommodation Owner, 08.31. 2010; Farmer II, Father, 09.13.2010). It was proposed that increased access to the Internet weakened interaction. For young people, the Internet became the main source of information, knowledge about other's experiences as well as the way to promote tourism services (Accommodation Owner, 08.31. 2010). Prior to increased access to the Internet, LAG I members wanted to act together (Father, 09.13.2010) and formal relationships have been difficult to distinguish from private ones.

Views of a LAG often depend upon the quality and quantity of personal relationships. Small Agritourism Owner (09.02.2010), who developed personal relationship with one of the office staff, holds a positive view of Local Action Group I. She believed that her, and LAG I staff help each other in various projects. Another positive view of LAG I is that its actions are effective because it engages representatives of local interests who communicate stakeholders' concerns and make decisions together (Restaurant Owner, 09.20.2010)

“I think that cooperation goes well ... Kashubs have one important feature that I like...this is the society that keeps together ... groups that hold together can achieve something.” (Restaurant Owner, 09.20.2010)

For Accommodation Owner (08.31. 2010) LAG I is necessary to mobilize tourism stakeholders with local resources as it generates tourism action (Tour Guide, 09.31. 2010). This

is so because LAG members are not afraid to express their mind, nor do they feel offended if others' views and opinions differ:

“We can discuss and express different views [and] ... at the end we reach the point where all participants are able to work on a strategy or LAG I goals” (Restaurant Owner, 09.20.2010)

On the other site of spectrum Local Artist suggested that authorities' responsibilities for tourism development overlap LAG I activities. He explained:

“The same people work for government and participate in LAG ... I think it is all about additional money ...” (Local Artist, 09.01.2010)

“The Decision Board create people who work full time in local governments – there are no people from social sector” (Local Artist, 09.01.2010)

Other perceived negative aspect of LAG I include insufficient information about the effects of its actions and evaluation its activities (Father, 09.13.2010; Son, 09.17.2010). No studies have yet justified funding distributed to tourism promotion (Son, 09.17.2010). Limited information about LEADER's contribution to tourism action and lack of research supporting legitimacy of LAG I actions may lead to misunderstanding the role of LEADER, misunderstanding the purpose of LAG I meetings as well as negative attitudes and growing opposition to proposed projects (e.g. Son, 09.17.2010; Father, 09.13.2010; Small Agritourism Owner, 09.02.2010; Local Artist, 09.01.2010).

The most often stresses characteristic of LAG II were vast cultural differences between the Northern and Southern parts of the region. In the past some stakeholders opposed the idea of including both Northern and Southern parts of the area in LAG II (Director of LAG II office,

08.11.2010; President of LAG II Decision Board, 09.04.2010). Those difficulties were overcome and nowadays, LAG II appears to be able to make positive changes to the area by facilitating North-South cooperation (President of LAG II Decision Board, 09.04.2010). It seeks to act upon the needs of local society by systematically updating the strategy document on a regular basis (President of LAG II Decision Board, 09.04.2010; Farmer II, 08.05.2010).

LAG II seeks to cooperate with the public sector that improves its image and reliability as a trust-worthy association focused on rural tourism development (President of LAG II Decision Board, 09.04.2010). It is believed that politics in LAG II would lead to mismanagement of the LEADER funds. During the interview the President of the Decision Board highlighted that he discouraged officials from engaging LAG II in their political conflicts. LAG II managed to isolate politics to the extent that it allows for cooperation within tourism action.

“The group is alive and is not controlled by politicians and politics; perhaps this makes its action less effective but it is not controlled from outside” (President of the LAG II Decision Board, 09.04.2010)

Nevertheless some participants from the public sector attempt to involve LAG II stakeholders in political conflicts.

„There was a situation that a woman who was a member of the Decision Board representing an association was also employed in local government – conflict developed between them and that gmina tried to get LAG involved in the conflict” (President of the LAG II Decision Board, 09.04.2010)

LAG II was established as a result of cooperation between two groups of local activists that simultaneously applied for funding from LEADER (Director of the LAG II office,

08.11.2010). The role of LAG II is to promote and coordinate action of local tourism businesses and many important ideas come from the private sector. LAG II stakeholders are encouraged to act upon their values and opinions during their participation in decision-making (President of LAG II Decision Board, 09.04.2010). However, Director of the LAG II office expressed concerns about LAG II. LAG II has grown and its current size reduces the quality of participatory approach, as it is unable to accommodate stakeholders' needs, and support all tourism development projects (Farmer II, 08.05.2010; Director of the LAG II office, 08.11.2010). Tensions between maintaining good cooperation within the group and including many stakeholders from the LAG II area arise as its members begin to see the associated difficulties. It is expected therefore that LAG II makes bottom-up initiatives its priority in order to compensate its current inability to accommodate all needs (Director of the LAG II office, 08.11.2010).

In order to improve communication with rural stakeholders, LAG II is developing a stakeholders' database. Such database would also help LAG II to organize workshops that are interesting to stakeholders. LAG II wants to provide needed training that would lead to increase of number of applications for LEADER funding (President of LAG II Decision Board, 09.04.2010). To date, however, stakeholders have not shown much interest in skills training as it has not focused on their needs.

LAG III has been characterized by conflict between gminas as well as other members. The first President of LAG III attempted to assign all available funding to one town. Stakeholders in opposition were concerned that LAG III served the purpose of the three dominating gminas. As a result of conflict and negative personal relationships between officials a few gminas stepped out from LAG III. Even today the poor communication and cooperation is

the major negative feature of the group LAG III within LAG III is not as smooth as one would expect after months of reorganizing (Social Representative, 09.02.2010).

Those conflicts escorted the development of the strategic document. In addition to that, officials who participated in LAG III failed to communicate their expectations regarding the strategy to experts involved in the strategy building process and were not satisfied with the document created by the experts (Social Representative, 09.02.2010). LAG III had to go through the process of strategy building one more time:

“Gminas and LAG participants were not satisfied with the strategy so LAG decided to do it alone and in fact the process was chaotic“
(Authorities Representative, 09.19.2010)

“There was a significant misunderstanding about strategy development ... I don't know details but a person who was responsible for completing the strategy copied a strategy from someone else and ... it is not worth to talk about it” (Social Representative, 09.02.2010)

“In the beginning the representatives of 8 gminas would travel to brainstorm, but then the company who agreed in the past came and conducted analysis – but they did a poor job ...” (Social Representative, 09.02.2010)

Based on the findings from the above section it is proposed that the positive views of how LAGs became and what they today may motivate rural society. On the other hand negative perception of a LAG processes may lead to lack of any interest in participation in LEADER or engaging in local actions.

5.3. Participatory tourism development

5.3.1. Perception of the LEADER approach

Due to the deficit of information, rural stakeholders are often unable to perceive the difference between LEADER and other EU programs. Gminas are believed to lead decision-making and distribution of EU funding and many stakeholders' restrain from LAGs. (the President of LAG II Decision Board, 09.04.2010). Others, however became involved with the Local Action Groups mainly because of available funding from LEADER. Benefits from participation in the LAG are the core incentive for stakeholders to get involved in any activities in addition to their every-day routine (Farmer I, 07.27.2010; Restaurant Owner, 09.20.2010; Accommodation Owner, 08.31. 2010; New Accommodation Owner, 08.31.2010). Diversity of submitted development projects demonstrates different needs and expectations from LEADER. The private sector submits projects proposals mainly for funding small projects, while local authorities and other the public sector units aim at funding for larger tourism investments. Currently funds are mainly distributed to gminas for development of road infrastructure. Such projects don't require residents' participation. Two interviewees felt excluded from the strategy development as they believed that LAG I did not need to engage residents because it is concerned primarily with large businesses stakeholders (Skeptic, 08.28.2010; Local Artist, 09.01.2010). The Skeptic suggested that stakeholders are encouraged to participate in LAGs only because funding within the LEADER framework requires independent business (Skeptic, 08.28.2010).

Few stakeholders understood LEADER's positive impact on relationships within the local society (Son, 09.17.2010; Father, 09.13.2010; Accommodation Owner, 08.31. 2010). Benefits from participation in LEADER include cooperation and access to resources such as

knowledge about LEADER and information. Participation in LEADER allows stakeholders work together in LAG committees and during LAG meetings (Restaurant Owner, 09.20.2010; Son, 09.17.2010; Father, 09.13.2010;).

The interviewed Farmer I and Farmer II (07.27.2010; 08.05.2010) highlighted that many people don't want to directly participate organized actions such as LAGs. On the other hand, others are very interested in contributing to the overall wellbeing of local society through participation in programs like LEADER. In conclusion, they suggested that there always will be stakeholders interested in programs like LEADER:

“There was relatively many project applications, and mainly small projects and bottom up initiatives” (Farmer II, 08.05.2010)

Farmer I proposed that the complicated project application procedures may lead some local residents to disengagement from LEADER:

„I also think that some people were discouraged” (Farmer I, 07.27.2010;)

Conversely, procedures developed to elect new local representatives appear clear and understandable. Members of the Decision Board are chosen officially during meetings in gminas (the President of LAG II Decision Board, 09.04.2010). LAG II chose a meeting coordinator in each gmina to coordinate the election process. In addition each gmina assigns a representative of local authorities but two other representatives in LAG II are elected: one from the public, and one from the private or the social sector. If a representative of the private/social sector leaves the LAG, new gmina election process is held.

In LEADER, selected officials represent local authorities. Therefore, the President of Decision Board highlights that officials' views should reflect position of gminas rather than their personal opinions:

“A representative of the gmina is perceived by the rest of Board as an entire gmina – as he represents gmina’s interest” (President of the LAG II Decision Board, 09.04.2010)

Officials, who represent gminas in LAG II are not given enough authority to make independent decisions in LAGs:

“Public sector representatives usually do what they are supposed to do, get paid and leave ... it is not beneficial to think independently from their supervisors” (Small Local Agriculture Owner, 09.06.2010)

The Director of the LAG II office (08.11.2010) asserted that stakeholders from the private sector would be skeptical about LEADER if authorities were perceived to have an overwhelming influence on the LAG. Such situation is possible because promotion of LAG independence from authorities doesn’t reach the targeted groups.

According to the President of Decision Board, new stakeholders join the group sporadically as current regulations reduce motivation to project-based partnerships (President of LAG II Decision Board, 09.04.2010). President of the LAG II Decision Board, for instance, suggested that effectiveness of procedures that integrate stakeholders under the LEADER framework must be evaluated (President of the LAG II Decision Board, 09.04.2010).

LEADER often overwhelms stakeholders, who view procedures as ‘ridiculously’ complicated (President of Local Tourism Organization, 09.14.2010; Farmer II, 08.05.2010). Therefore private sector stakeholders need more opportunities to learn about the LEADER (Social Representative, 09.02.2010). Even associations do not have funds to match 50% of a project expenses and by accepting support from local authorities they become dependent on the

public sector. While LEADER is a new approach in Pomerania, the program has not reached its full potential as it still requires investment in promotion of the approach and education of rural stakeholders about its benefits.

5.3.2. Perception of tourism decision-making

Perception of tourism decision-making varied among the interviewees. Even long-term tourism stakeholders may hold a negative view of current local tourism development efforts (e.g. Local Artist, 09.01.2010; Skeptic, 08.28.2010) mainly due to ineffective former actions. For example, Skeptic used to be active in tourism sector in his gmina and encouraging officials to invest in tourism. However, past meetings about tourism development led only to development of informal relationships and personal conversations (Skeptic, 08.28.2010). At that time no investments were made in tourism infrastructure of promotion of local facilities.

The decision-making processes in LAG I included the exchange of experiences between the participants and discussions about future activities (Son, Father). Especially, evaluation of project proposals successfully engages stakeholders in meaningful discussions:

“ (...) Any proposal is considered and discussed” (Son, 09.17.2010)

Establishing LAG I required local and regional meetings. Meetings at regional level aimed at including representatives from different gminas whereas meetings within a gmina focused on local stakeholders (Father, 09.13.2010). The meetings sought to encourage new farmers to explore funding opportunities for their tourism projects and connect stakeholders (Farmer I, 07.27.2010; Father, 09.13.2010). However, new stakeholders may challenge the hierarchy established in LEADER. LAG I, for example, has experienced some difficulties in developing positive relations with new landowners, who disagreed to development of the tourism

infrastructure in their land. Some new landowners simply refuse to engage in LAG I and to cooperate.

General meetings during the strategy development process took the form of public debate (Father, 09.13.2010). The goal was to identify stakeholders from private and social sectors who would further participate in workshops. Many of them disengaged after the strategy was ready (Son, 09.17.2010; Farmer I, 07.27.2010;). On the other hand, the interviewed Restaurants Owner stressed that strategy building for LEADER focused on the development of action plans and former participants supported ideas that appealed to them. When the action plans were ready, participants did not see the need to continue their engagement in LAG.

According to Skeptic current actions of LAG I do not aim at engaging representatives of all local tourism interests. On the other hand, the Accommodation Owner (08.31. 2010) stated that, for example the idea to create ‘tourism gates, a local tourism information system emerged during meetings related to strategy development. Whereas he views the project as a result of intensive cooperation in decision-making process, others may hold more negative views.

Accommodation Owner (08.31. 2010), Farmer I (07.27.2010), Local Artist and Restaurant Owner (09.20.2010) pointed out that gminas agreed about the distribution of LEADER funding for public sector investments. The core stakeholders don’t question this behind-the-scene agreement (Accommodation Owner, 08.31. 2010). The Accommodation Owner (08.31. 2010) recalled that once one of the Mayors submitted two project proposals instead of one, as it was agreed. Other stakeholders mobilized to discourage him from pursuing more than one project. The Accommodation Owner describes the situation as follows:

“Other LAG members called the Mayors and asked whether in fact the two project proposals submitted to LAG were not a mistake. What

followed is the attempt to apply different means to disqualify one of the project proposals. Finally the Mayor withdrew one of the proposals submitted to LAG for evaluation. Such situations show the consensus among the core stakeholders, but also that certain rules are imposed on participants regardless of their individual views and needs.”

(Accommodation Owner, 08.31. 2010)

The above examples of agreements within LAG I, discourage stakeholders who disagree with values shared by LAG I most powerful members. All interviewees agreed that potential stakeholders should become familiar with values reflected by LAG. If they don't support these values they should not get involved in LAG I.

Formally, the decision-making regarding re-distribution of the remaining LEADER funds is viewed as democratic. The Decision Board usually makes suggestions but decisions regarding implementation are made based on the voting majority. As much as strategy building is usually at least consulted with stakeholders from the private sector, the character of development strategy implementation was not (Father, 09.13.2010; Son, 09.17.2010). Typically, the participatory approach in LEADER does not cover decision-making about strategy implementation and some stakeholders may disapprove implementation techniques (Father, 09.13.2010; Son, 09.17.2010).

“I agree to all the ideas but less to how they are implemented” (Son, 09.17.2010)

Farmer II noted that in LAG II private stakeholders contribute with their time and individual resources, while officials engage only in LAG II during their working hours for municipalities.

“Whereas private stakeholders contribute to LAG II because they believe in its advantage over other local organizations, officials only do what their job requires” (Farmer II, 08.05.2010).

Only during the first phase of strategy building participants felt capable of deciding what projects they wanted to pursue and what would be the most important tasks (Farmer II, 08.05.2010). More interactions happen between members of the Decision Board; hence they are more likely to cooperate and make decisions together. No dysfunctional conflicts were reported to occur among LAG II stakeholders within the Decision Board (President of LAG II Decision Board, 09.04.2010). The fact that the Board consists of only one representative from a gmina and one representative from the social sector, does not create an advantage of the public sector over other stakeholders

Stakeholders can lobby their ideas only through participation in LAG II (President of Local Tourism Organization, 09.14.2010) and the majority of the stakeholders don't get involved (President of Local Tourism Organization, 09.14.2010):

“Currently gminas can't benefit from LEADER if they do not participate in LAG II actions. It is difficult to coordinate such large groups without additional incentives – rules must be clear but demanding. Gminas' representatives had particular interests in LAG and often it was money- so gminas want to belong but they don't want to participate- even though in fact there are not too many gminas that sit passively” (President of Local Tourism Organization, 09.14.2010)

Meetings organized in every gmina promoted LAG II membership. Following the development stage brainstorming, a SWOT analysis was prepared by small groups of enthusiastic

stakeholders (Farmer II, 08.05.2010). However, as stakeholders continued their involvement in the LAG their positive attitudes often faded away due to disappointment with LEADER procedures or other LEADER participants (Director of LAG II office, 08.11.2010). Residents have been expected to talk about their tourism-related concerns during meetings within gminas but often those meetings provide only a limited opportunity for discussion of emerging issues (Farmer II, 08.05.2010).

The President of LAG II Decision Board (09.14.2010) made it clear that stakeholders who were involved from the beginning of the strategy-building process are more welcomed in LAG II. Small Local Agriculture Owner (09.06.2010) also feels that criteria for participation discriminate against the new enthusiastic stakeholders because of insufficient information about LAG II.

The President of the LAG II Decision Board expressed fear regarding LAG II dependence upon local authorities. Already, some gminas sought to influence decision about their potential memberships (President of LAG II Decision Board, 09.14.2010). However LAG II must remain independent from the public sector in order to facilitate bottom-up initiatives of the private and social sectors (Director of LAG II office, 08.11.2010). Unfortunately, the cooperation between sectors is limited because officials view tourism ‘as a cure’ for all rural problems and they misunderstand the role of LAG II due to insufficient communication:

“There is often miscommunication inside gminas and the Mayors do not know why his representatives did not participate in LAG’s meetings.”

(President of the LAG II Decision Board, 09.14.2010)

Given the area’s tourism potential, LAG III officials understand that tourists perceive the area as one large destination. Others, who don’t support this view usually don't get involved in

LAG III (Social Representative, 09.02.2010). Formerly, differences in pursued goals led to the conflict between local stakeholders. Today the strongest opposition for tourism development comes from the Forest Management officials and continues to interrupt the effective decision-making process (Authorities Representative, 09.19.2010). The conflicts between priorities (biodiversity conservation vs. economic benefits through sustainable tourism) discourage potential LEADER participants. Different experiences and knowledge lead to sporadic disagreements among LAG III members. However, social Representative reported no recent conflicts (Social Representative, 09.02.2010). The representative of local authorities added that lack of conflict is likely to be only a transition stage. It is expected that along with the distribution of funds the character of stakeholders' relationships will change.

“As no money is involved, there is yet no open conflict. So far officials communicate and agree” (Social Representative, 09.02.2010)

Some gminas tried to share with residents projects ideas they plan to implement with LEADER but most of the time the bottom up approach to decision-making in this area is not effective (Social Representative, 09.02.2010). According to the Social Representative, local residents haven't been interested in participation. It is important to emphasize that collective farms dominated the LAG III area during the communist system:

“The bottom-up approach is not working – it is my subjective judgment. It seems that in this area it is very difficult to implement the bottom-up approach because residents don't seem to respond to gmina's initiatives.” (Authorities Representative, 09.19.2010)

The process of strategy building was designed to be inclusive in creating a document so that LAG III could apply for LEADER EU funds. However, without the input of the residents the public sector dominated the process:

“Each gmina delegated an official to submit recommended improvements that each gmina wants to include in the strategy document... only later some public consultations happened” (Social Representative, 09.02.2010)

Regardless of the non-participatory character of the strategy development process, the interviewed Representative of Local Authorities believes that the document reflects multiple tourism interests and local differences in the envisioned future of LAG III and the covered area:

“Any stakeholder could express their opinion about the document and anyone could participate and suggest what is needed for tourism development” (Social Representative, 09.02.2010)

Only selected representatives in each gmina, were asked to indicate the strengths and weaknesses of the area. LAG III organized a few meetings to establish criteria for evaluation of development project in villages and these meetings raised little interest among locals.

5.4. Summary

It is still too early to fully evaluate the effects of LEADER and the empowerment through a Local Action Groups. The presented findings imply that the program can contribute to the collapse of old local social and political order and formerly established power relations as long as the private sector is a part of it. As unrealistic as this may appear, LEADER challenges the leading position of local authorities in development processes. On the one hand it enhances integration of local authorities and their cooperation due to a common goal to reduce the private

sector benefit from LEADER. On the other hand it integrates representatives of the private sector that aim at re-positioning themselves within the LEADER framework.

Local Action Group I is characterized by the rather strong local identity of the core stakeholders, which may be both viewed as its advantage as well as disadvantage. The strong identity became a significant barrier to local interaction between stakeholders with different values because many regard themselves as an 'outsider'. Whereas, rural stakeholders pointed at generally weak cooperation between private and public sectors, many thought that LEADER approach increased their potential to participate in tourism decisions-making. Sometimes, however, established patterns of political and social dependencies between stakeholders, attenuate these egalitarian efforts. Also, some stakeholders expressed concerns that participation in a LAG requires views of tourism development shared with the most powerful LAG members.

From another point of view the good relations with local officials developed due to past cooperation regarding tourism may improve access to resources such as information. Whereas the long-term participants strengthen formerly established relationships, those who recently joined the group and are less familiar with other members appear to benefit mainly from development of new personal connections. On the other hand those who valued their established relations believe that they have the capacity to influence local decision-making.

The character of social relationships and the quality of cooperation among LAG II stakeholders are important factors that also influence their perception of an individual's role in LEADER. It was also found that support from public sector representatives improves the image of the LAG and its reliability. Conversely, close relationships between the public sector and the LAG may be viewed by the private sector as LAG dependency upon authorities. Such a perspective often discourages the bottom-up initiatives of the private sector.

The main advantage of LAGs over any other organized group that acts toward rural development is that they can become an alternative power setting for tourism stakeholders, in which they feel empowered to pursue their interests. However, in order to be considered successful, members of the LAG community must find a common ground for action. Stakeholders may develop shared identity due to cooperation within LEADER. Therefore LAGs actions should focus on facilitating cooperation between rural stakeholders.

The emerging problem is limited access to information about the LEADER framework. As a result even officials may view the program as a chaotic initiative that makes no contribution to rural development. To date, LEADER has confused even local authorities. Thus, better promotion of the program is needed among authorities.

Priorities emerging from the LEADER process do not always agree with priorities of powerful stakeholders in the region such as local governments. As much as many local officials support the private sector they prefer to remain the leaders of local development and they don't hesitate to use available tools to maintain their status. Many of those tools aim at increasing the dependency of the social and private stakeholders upon local officials. Such attitudes by local authorities ensure that a development program will not interrupt the current status quo.

Organization of the chapter aimed at linking the findings with the concept of empowerment in the process of tourism development as well as enhancing local democratic practices. Stakeholders' past cooperation in different LAGs was found to encourage action within the group. As expected, current collaboration may also change their attitudes toward LEADER and their views of role in Local Action Groups. Also, in LAGs I personal relationships determine who identifies with the LAG and who feels comfortable during LAGs actions.

The LEADER procedures complicate the situation in Pomerania as they are viewed as another barrier to action at both the individual and community level. The growing administrative burden for EU programs is considered unnecessary. However, increased access to local resources due to participation in LAG activities may improve cooperation between stakeholders. It primarily refers to creating both formal and informal links between individuals and groups to establish local structures for multi-stakeholder decision-making. Participation may be driven by a variety of factors, but unless participants benefit they are unlikely to get involved in activities that demand their time and resources. Benefits from participation in the LAG are the core incentive for local residents to get involved and any tourism development action needs to acknowledge it.

In the qualitative approach different findings dominate in different contexts. In some cases LEADER and LAG communities are viewed as a positive contribution to the overall wellbeing of a local society. Others may perceive LAGs as an unnecessary tool for the local authorities to increase their control over social and private initiatives. The following chapter presents my conclusions about the relevance of the findings and how they relate to the current state of local democracy in Poland and the practical implications of this study.

6. CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSIONS

The number of recent rural tourism initiatives in Poland have dealt for years with disempowered local stakeholders that lacked either skills or/and enthusiasm to reach out to resources embedded in local relationships. The role of social relationships in individual and community empowerment in the context of rural post-communist transition has not yet received relevant attention from scholars. More studies are necessary.

This study explored stakeholders' perceptions of empowerment within the LEADER rural development framework in the context of post-communist transition. The findings presented in Chapter IV are based on the analysis of the strategy documents and other texts related to LAGs. That chapter outlined both similarities and differences between the three Local Action Groups in Pomerania. The discussion about the character of LAG community started with the description of origins and evolution of the LEADER approach in Europe and Poland. It closed with the portrayal of Local Action Groups in the region.

The first phase of the research did not investigate stakeholders' subjective perceptions of LEADER. Hence, Chapter V examined the findings from the face-to-face semi-structured interviews with tourism stakeholders regarding their views. The main task of the *Conclusions* Chapter is to summarize findings, propose implications of the findings for Local Action Groups as well as refine the proposed conceptual model and show possibilities for future studies focused on empowerment in tourism development.

The study findings must be interpreted within the unique context of the post-communist transition in Poland. Also, qualitative techniques of data collection and analysis led to interpretations of the findings in this particular context. It simply means that if this study's procedures are repeated in different setting, future findings will most likely differ from the

current study results. Contribution of this study is that it increases the understanding of LEADER effects, and different perceptions of empowerment within the development framework in the post-communist setting.

6.1 Theoretical implications

American scholars, who adopted the interactional field approach to study rural communities understand the process of community development as the advancement of local interactions across local fields of interest (Wilkinson 1991; Theodori, 2005; Brennan, Flint and Liloff, 2008). The main goal of Chapter IV was to assess whether the LEADER approach to tourism decision-making in Pomerania facilitates empowerment at a community level by facilitating local centers for community interaction (Local Action Groups). These claims have been supported by the findings from the analysis of documents. However, slightly different to what Wilkinson (1991) proposed, community development through Local Action Groups in Pomerania required the supportive public sector.

In Pomerania, community actions need a development framework, which allows stakeholders to act together toward realization of their changing needs. Otherwise many rural societies in post-communist transition will remain incapable of acting together. Thus, in the transitioning economy like Poland LEADER framework is an important component of local institutional arrangements facilitating stakeholders' interaction, relationships and even joint actions toward betterment of the local society (e.g. through cooperative projects). Just as Eguren (2008) noted in the case of Guatemala and Bolivia, also in Poland, the participatory decision-making processes within a development framework, brings stakeholders together on relatively equal ground. Table 2 juxtaposes the elements of LEADER and the Local Action Group

framework with components of an interactional community according to Wilkinson (1991) and his followers.

Aspects of interactional community	LEADER /Local Action Groups
1. Local interaction and local relationships are the foundation of interactional communities.	Bottom-up development is supported by legal development framework. Relationships are the foundation of the local development.
2. An interaction space (e.g. development project) becomes the core of interactional community	LAG becomes the main forum of stakeholders' interaction. Interacting stakeholders define the area of the Local Action Group and the reach of LAG actions.
3. Action is directed toward a common goal defined by participants.	Stakeholders determine focus of their actions (development strategy)
4. Stakeholders join action on voluntary basis- they can decide whether they want to participate in the action	Stakeholders volunteer to participate in LAG. Participation in a Local Action Group and its activities are a form of stakeholders' action.
5. Action leads community change.	Stakeholders become agents for local change enabled to act through the Local Action Group Participation in LAG facilitates development of relationships across sectors/ but sometimes does not.
6. Interaction across social fields/ fosters development of relationships and alters existing relationships Community stakeholders represent different social fields of interest	Designed to promote interaction between private and public sectors

Table 2 Local Action Group as an interactional community in the post-communist setting

Local Action Groups usually operate as organizations to coordinators of rural development. They receive external funding to promote participatory development approaches and development of local cooperative relationships between stakeholders from different sectors. Contemporary LAGs have become arenas for local interaction among rural tourism stakeholders across broad range of issues, whereas their leaders coordinate local tourism development efforts.

The findings also suggest that relationships and cooperation between stakeholders outside LAGs influence the quality of interactions and the cooperation within the LAG structures and thereby they influence their capacity to act. Putnam (2000) proposed that the levels and quality of social capital impacts the capacity of communities such as LAGs. Stakeholders' increasing

acting capacities foster communities' empowerment. However, just as Helling, Serrano and Warren (2005) note, empowerment at the community level (Local Action Group) requires additional investments in development of local social relationships. The finding implication from this study is that in principle LAGs transform vertical links among participants outside a LAG into horizontal links within LEADER framework, so that all members feel more equal and empowered in the decision-making process (Chapter IV).

The process of strategy development was the first and probably the most significant action at this scale that was proposed within the LEADER framework. At first, the most active local stakeholders participated in the strategy building. The process of strategy building should eventually involved representatives of different interests. As such the process appears to have aimed at engaging a wider range of stakeholders, and therefore increase opportunities for developing new relationships (Putnam, 2000).

So far a majority of studies that seek to define empowerment and accordingly to identify mechanisms that lead to empowerment have neglected the significance of local context. Therefore, scholars need to investigate empowerment under different political and socio-economic circumstances. Also, one of the major findings regarding empowerment is that it usually happens in a particular dimension (Zimmerman, 1995). From the perspective of interactional field theory, empowerment at individual level happens within different social fields such as environmental action, rural development or tourism. At the field level empowerment is visible through a field's interactions, whereas at the community level empowerment it is manifested through emergence of a community action.

Indeed, the LEADER development framework appears to have fostered the building capacity for action among rural stakeholders to determine their own affairs (Cole, 2006) as

stakeholders gained more control over the local development processes (Rappaport, 1987). On the other hand empowerment at the community level was conceptualized as a community field (Chapter 2). This conceptualization of empowerment has not been found in literature dedicated to research about community and tourism development.

The interviewees, who have already benefited from tourism development usually expressed enthusiasm for participation in LEADER. It is therefore concluded here that past benefits from tourism may encourage stakeholders to participate in the community field as well as engage in joint tourism actions. Local Action Groups appear capable of mobilizing rural stakeholders mainly because of LEADER funding. Participation may be driven by a variety of factors, but unless participants receive material benefits, they don't get involved in activities that demand their time or other resources. Under such circumstances those seeking to empower stakeholders need to take into account stakeholders' expectations of individual gains. Hence, tourism policymaking in post-communist areas of Poland needs provide additional incentives for stakeholders to participate in the process.

Stakeholders in each LAG express unique needs and expectations due to different experiences in the post-communist localities. Therefore, universal mechanisms that aim at empowering local societies in tourism decision-making are unlikely to succeed. Thus, when designing means to implement operational frameworks such as LEADER one should account for unique factors that may have an impact on stakeholders. In Pomerania, features Local Action Groups include social apathy among villagers, disappointment with early years of socio-economic transition as well as other effects of the post-communist rural transition. For example LAG I is relatively small group with the emphasis on local identity. The group appears to be led by the core stakeholders along with narrow views of the desired character of future members.

Much as Local Action Groups seek to build a common identity and a group's cohesion, too much group cohesion may be perceived as a barrier to interaction for new participants. They view themselves as 'outsiders' in a LAG that pursues interests of the core members. Strong community identity and focus of community action is not always an incentive for new potential community participants and may be perceived as intentions to exclude stakeholders with different views and opinions. Some of the potential community participants may view such strong identity of the core members and explicit demonstration of their shared values as an intentional step to discourage them from participation in LEADER. Also stakeholders who prefer different modes of operation than those proposed by the LEADER framework may feel that they 'don't fit' to the rest of the members. It is proposed that LAGs need to seek balance between strong identity of its leaders versus maintaining diversity of views among LAG's participants.

Next, the understanding of socio-political environment leads to the perception of better socio-political control and motivation to utilize individual and local resources. People act in accordance with their beliefs about the environment in which they operate as well as how they view their social and political status in rural society. The actual context of local decision-making appears less significant than stakeholders' perception of it. It is important how stakeholders view the LAGs efforts to democratize the process of tourism decision-making. Thus, leaders should help to form positive perceptions. If the stakeholders believe they are empowered in LEADER, they will act as empowered members of rural society. The findings from Chapter V implicate that stakeholders need guidance and education since empowerment is linked to the understanding of the LEADER framework. Stakeholders would feel more empowered in LEADER by learning their new EU environment. On the other hand some of the interviewees believed that their voices are neglected in decision-making and that the authorities still dominate the outcome of local

tourism actions. They focused on nurturing the negative view of local officials that leads to the negative attitude toward a LAG. Others simply avoided confrontations with the public sector. They felt that it is impossible to discuss with authorities because officials never acknowledge different views.

Benefits of LAG participation go beyond a specific subject. For example, findings implicate that local relations between the private and the public sector were established long before LEADER. The LEADER approach, however, became the new promising element of local structures that formally increased stakeholders' input into tourism decision-making. Several of the interviewed LEADER participants claimed to develop social relationships due to their involvement in Local Action Groups while for others the quality of their relationships did not change. Due to new or strengthened old relations stakeholders could increase their access to resources such as knowledge and information (Colleman, 1988, 1990). By increasing stakeholders' access to local resources relationships facilitate realization of their goals (Colleman, 1988, 1990). Relationships with officials developed due to prior tourism cooperation could increase their potential to access LAG resources. In fact, for many interviewees officials are the most important source of information and knowledge about LEADER. Also, stakeholders' views of their role in tourism decision-making appear to depend on their relations with local officials.

The patterns of political and social dependencies attenuate current egalitarian efforts of LAGs. The local dependencies are political remnants that still dominate local structures of rural societies in Poland. Unless the importance of these patterns declines, Local Action Groups will remain mainly distorted centers for local interactions. However, only as an alternative to the local power settings, Local Action Groups could impact the current relationships between the

public and private sectors. In other words, being financially and politically independent from local authorities, LAGs could better mobilize the private sector in autonomous actions.

The research sought to increase the understanding of the decision-making processes in the three Local Action Groups in Poland. The study results highlight several differences between the reality and assumptions of the conceptual model about empowerment in tourism development during post-communist socio-economic transitions. The main differences exist with regard to relationships and cooperation between LAG participants and officials. The conceptual model has insufficiently explored the role of the past cooperation and relationships between stakeholders from the private sector and representatives of local authorities due to remaining impact of the previous socialist system. For example that stakeholders' views of their relationships with officials influence a character of an interactional community field (a LAG) and perceived individual empowerment.

A model of empowerment within tourism development should better account for the following factors that impact interactions within the LEADER framework built upon a) historical political environment 2) current political environment and 3) other development programs that may have influenced relations between stakeholders. LEADER framework offers benefits to rural stakeholders and therefore it should foster adaptation of new approach to the decision-making. Stakeholders participating in LAGs are capable of better understanding the positive and negative tourism consequences find ways to articulate their needs and expectations. Contribution of the LEADER development framework in Pomerania is that it facilitates practice of local democracies by enhancing learning to empower local societies in tourism decision-making. Due to a number of tourism activities stakeholders learn new governance such as deliberation (see:

Lindeman, 2002). Even though it is believed that local authorities continue to dominate rural development efforts, they nevertheless do so to a lesser degree than before.

6.2. Practical implications

The principles of LEADER and the goals of LAGs may look impressive but simultaneously empowering multiple stakeholders to participate in the same community action is difficult. Findings show that empowering all tourism stakeholders has not yet been accomplished in any of the examined LAGs. In such a short time LAGs have existed, co-empowering multiple stakeholders appears to have a rather small chance of success in the transitioning rural setting of Pomerania. While it is possible for multiple groups to participate in LEASER tourism decision-making processes, it is less likely that all of them will feel empowered at any given time. Thus, the ideal of equally empowering all stakeholders appears impossible because of individual differences in perceiving the efforts of Local Action Groups. ``

Pursuing egalitarian values in the decision-making process by Local Action Groups may lead to stakeholders' disappointment with LEADER. LAG participants represent different values and interests that often conflict with each other. If a LAG seeks to satisfy all local demands, stakeholders may begin to view it as organization without a clear profile and therefore one that is unable to act effectively in order to meet their needs. Furthermore many may view a LAG as an organization that supports views that are in conflict with their own and therefore manifest negative attitudes toward its action. Creating strong vision of the future of LAG may help to solve some of the above issues.

It has been noted that each of the investigated Local Action Group areas appeared to have at least one unique characteristic that would distinguish it from the other two. That unique feature usually determines the character of interaction among participating members. For

example in LAG I, the small size of the group enhanced familiarity among its members. The quality of interactions between participants has been strongly influenced by the character of relationships established during the early socio-economic transition and shaped by local leaders from that period.

Negative interaction among stakeholders (from public and the private sectors) may contribute to a negative view of the LAG and popular beliefs that it largely serves officials' needs. Thus, LAG I management needs to detect the source of those failed relationships and seek to revert their impact on the public image of LAG I. The LAG officers need to promote the LAG's positive image. In the current context, the emphasis on the apolitical character of tourism decision-making and development appears the most effective means to create the positive image of the group. Also, the fundamental differences between decision-making during the early transition and the current focus on the democratic and inclusive development process must be explained to the current and potential LAG I participants.

In LAG II, potential LEADER participants appear to evaluate the group based on cooperation among its members and especially individual cooperation with officials in the area. The supportive representatives of local public sector would improve reliability of the LAG community. On the other hand, if officials are believed to have too much influence on LAG II actions, the private sector stakeholders and potential LEADER participants may become more skeptical about their role in LEADER and LAG II actions. In addition, such views of the LAG II can discourage bottom-up initiatives.

Geographic diversity of the LAG II area contributes to its unique character and at the same time it threatens the LAG's integrity and reduces efficiency of tourism decision-making processes. Under these circumstances mutual recognition among collaborating stakeholders is a

necessary component of successful cooperation. Also, cooperation across regions fosters development of a shared identity and LAG II activities need to be designed to enhance such cooperation. In order to create legitimate tourism policies, the quality of interactions across different areas included in LAG II needs to be of a higher priority for the group.

Findings regarding LAG II imply that more skeptical villagers may attempt to separate LAG II activists from participation in local structures and events at a village level. The management of LAG II needs more actions integrating tourism stakeholders from remote areas such as joint training that reflects either stakeholders' interests in general or their interest in tourism projects within the LEADER framework. LAG II management might employ tools to improve interaction between participants such as a newsletter created by stakeholders about good practices in their villages.

LAG III is governed by gminas (Social Representative, Representative of local authorities). Social and private sectors participate in LAG III because it must meet LEADER requirements (social and private sectors do not pay annual fees). Given the large size of LAG III and ambitions of local officials conflict appeared the necessary step in the process of relationship building between LAG II stakeholders (Brennan, Flint and Luloff, 2008).

The LAG III procedures created by local officials manifest their lack of past experiences with funding from the European Union. Relationships between officials seem to contribute to the successful cooperation within the LEADER framework more than relations between representatives of the public and the private sector. Officials misunderstand the role of participatory processes and believe that they serve to confirm officials' ideas about local tourism development. They also create many barriers and make it difficult for potential LEADER

participants to contribute. One opportunity to learn how to deal with LEADER is to learn from experience of other LAGs in Pomerania and look for examples of good practices.

All Local Action Groups need to invest more resources in order to understand stakeholders' expectations about LAGs performance and tourism. Stakeholders whose expectations about their role in LEADER were met appeared more motivated to participate in tourism decision-making or even become involved in other actions. On the one hand officials regarded the passive attitudes in the private sector as the main reason for their low level involvement in LEADER. On the other hand, they are blamed for building additional barriers for the private sector to receive LEADER funding. Having a better knowledge and more experience, local officials don't share them with the private sector. This situation leads to an increasing distance between the representatives of the private and public sectors in LEADER.

LAGs seem to focus on distribution of LEADER funding to rural stakeholders, and to a great extent they neglect the importance of cooperation among their members and the quality of interaction within LEADER framework. Perhaps, LAGs should concentrate more on building a network of local relationships in tourism development so that stakeholders are capable of leading independent tourism development initiatives.

In addition, more training about the LEADER framework provided by LAGs is necessary. It needs to focus on overcoming barriers to empowerment through increasing stakeholders' understanding of the unique local circumstances and learning to successfully operate within the LEADER framework. Stakeholders need to be guided how to use opportunities for empowerment in tourism development projects. The unique LEADER framework needs to guide the selection of tools to educate and train LAG participants. Given the disadvantages of the LEADER framework and local and regional constraints to smooth

implementation of the program, Local Action Groups remain the leaders in rural development. They coordinate the distribution of LEADER funding as well as lead local workshops and training for rural stakeholders.

6.3. Implications for research

For this study, the views of local stakeholders became critical to understanding the community processes and perceived individual empowerment within a community field. Recent developments of rural sustainable tourism on post-communist societies will most likely lead to an increase in a number of studies focused on interactions and patterns of relationships in rural areas.

The main limitation of the study is that the presented results cannot be generalized beyond the examined areas and Local Action Groups. Therefore to gain a better understanding of the empowerment within tourism development and more generalizable findings, the proposed model needs be re-examined in different localities and possibly apply quantitative research techniques. Research should be conducted in other post-communist regions of Europe that adopted a LEADER approach in order to obtain perceptions of stakeholders in settings other than those in Pomerania.

Another limitation was the study's focus on participatory tourism development. It overlooks other local tourism development efforts. While illustrating contemporary conditions, the study examined a current political context in which a local government fulfills the role of a catalyst for inclusive processes of tourism development. The established political arrangement is that local governments allow for and support the creation of public spaces in which people can connect and communicate (Juroszek, 2008; Tuziak, 2008). The goal of limiting the research to

participatory tourism development efforts was necessary to assure that the concept of this work is clear.

Still more studies need to evaluate the positive effects of tourism initiatives such as LEADER and the effectiveness of the Local Action Groups in specific local contexts within Poland. Current studies do not appear to be concerned with different factors accelerating or diminishing positive effects on rural localities in the post-communist setting. Also, the available research appears to focus mainly on the evaluation of LEADER and LAGs role as local and regional officials promote it in official publications. Rarely have researchers asked the actual stakeholders about their views of the LEADER program. Future research should further investigate the rural stakeholder's perception of local institutions. Studies should also focus on an institutions' accountability, which is understood as appropriate procedures are in place to help participants gain information and demand better performance from decision makers. Therefore more research examining attitudes among rural stakeholders toward different development programs and policies in CEE is needed.

The findings suggest that inability to act effectively within the LEADER framework increases stakeholders' skepticism and distrust toward officials they interact with at a local level. A common feature of many Local Action Groups is their inability to meet stakeholders' expectations about direction rural development. This situation further leads to more negative perceptions of cooperation between the public and private sectors. More studies are needed to investigate the link between stakeholder's expectations about Local Action Groups and their views of performance of LAGs. Similar studies can lead to interesting findings relevant to future tourism operations Poland.

The implementation of the LEADER approach through LAGs actions involves bottom-up decision-making and cooperation among rural stakeholders. Such approaches to rural development may create an advantage for those groups significantly advanced in the processes of democratization and decentralization. In other words, the author is concerned that LEADER will deepen discrepancies between advantaged and disadvantaged areas, and this danger needs to be examined. It therefore leads to development of underdevelopment in many potential rural destinations in Poland.

Finally, lower development potential of some areas in Poland and less successful implementation of the LEADER framework may be a result of the scarcity of human capital as a result of an earlier period of economic and political transition. During that time many young and better-educated residents left rural areas. Tourism studies could explore links between the quality of human capital and the quality of the LEADER approach in the post-soviet context. Not only should scholars continue to examine tourism stakeholders' views of rural tourism development initiatives within frameworks similar to LEADER, but also more studies must seek to identify specific factors that influence the stakeholders' perception of individual empowerment in different contexts.

6.4. Summary

The LEADER approach to tourism in the context of post-communist socio-economic transition integrates the concepts of democratic consolidation and interactional community field. It was designed to support disadvantaged rural areas mobilize rural resources and foster area-based development. Nonetheless this study discovered the disparity between the LEADER principles and socio-political aspects of its implementation. The most emerging problem in the examined LAGs was the balance between integration of participating stakeholders (e.g. quality

of interactions, cooperation) and accessibility to new stakeholders who represent different values as well as the impact of past relations on the current cooperation.

LAGs are a part of social structure in the localities in Pomerania. They introduce new forms of cooperation and participation in decision-making. On the one hand participation in Local Action Groups may enhance the democratic processes in rural areas, as participants feel more entitled to tourism making-decision (Chapter 3; Rowlands, 1997). On the other hand rural localities in Pomerania require more training about meaningful participation in decision-making and participants in LAGs need to learn empowerment in various dimensions of their lives such as tourism development. In this sense, training is a process that teaches stakeholders how to feel and act empowered.

The study aimed to demonstrate that programs including participatory tourism developments affect rural societies in various ways. Not only can does tourism development improve the overall economic situation of many rural areas, but it also affects interactions among stakeholders. The current effects of participatory tourism development in Pomerania are embedded in the LEADER framework and adapted to the context of post-communist rural societies. Given the transition context the author critically examined the perceptions of stakeholders from the three Local Action Groups and discussed empowerment within the LEADER framework.

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APPENDIX A

Informed Consent

My name is Marianna Strzelecka. I am a Graduate student at the University of Illinois working under the direction of Dr. Bruce E. Wicks from the Department of Recreation, Sport and Tourism at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The purpose of the study is to examine how opportunities of participation in tourism decision-making within Pomerania Region empower local tourism stakeholders. I am interested in discovering whether empowering procedures in tourism decision-making advance local democratic practices.

I really appreciate you considering the participation in my study. The expected length of the interview is approximately 40 minutes. Your participation in this project is completely voluntary. There is no penalty for choosing not to participate nor are there any risks involved in participating beyond those that exist in everyday life. You can decide whether or not you want to participate in this project. Furthermore, you don't have to answer any questions you don't wish to answer. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason.

In order to ensure that I accurately record your comments, I would like to digitally audio record the interview with your permission. The information collected will be kept confidential and the only people who will have access to the interview files are the people working on the project. The files will be destroyed within two months of the interview and a pseudonym (fake name) will be used on any written notes and transcripts so that the interview cannot be traced back to you.

Participation the study gives you opportunity to openly discuss and reflect on the feelings that you have about participatory tourism development processes. You will be able to express your thoughts about tourism development that has taken place and impact of the process on local relationships. A broader benefit of your participation in the study is that it will help me to better understand of the role of participatory tourism decision-making in shaping local democratic practices. The findings from this study will be used in my doctoral thesis and will provide significant information for tourism management organizations about effects of participatory tourism development practices.

I sincerely thank you for your help with this study. The results of this research (with the use of pseudonyms) will be disseminated to researchers in the field of tourism development via conference presentations and potential journal articles or book chapters. If you would like to receive a copy of the results or if you have any questions or comments, please contact me at:

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Phone: 00(1) (217) 3336160

You will be provided with copy of this Informed Consent Letter.
If you have any further questions regarding your rights as a project participant you may **contact** University of Illinois Institutional Review Board at (217) 333-2670 (collect calls accepted if you identify yourself as a research participant) or by email at irb@illinois.edu. The Institutional Review Board is the office at the University of Illinois responsible for protecting the rights of human subjects involved in studies conducted by University of Illinois researchers.

By placing a check in the spaces below:

I certify that I'm at least 18 years of age.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
I have read and understood this consent letter and voluntarily agree to participate.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
I have had the information on this form explained to me.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
I grant permission for my interview to be digitally recorded.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>

Participant's signature

Date

APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol

Name _____ Occupation _____ Date _____

Phone _____

Sample Questions

1. How long have you been involved in LAG?
2. Have you developed new relationships in result of your participation in LAG?
3. Do you believe that you learned new thing
4. Do you think you have a better access to information now when you meet with others in LAG?
5. Did you developed new friendships or maybe meet new partners for your business.
6. These new relationships are valuable and that you are benefiting or will benefit from them in the future?
7. Did the participation in LAG change character or strengthen past relationships.
8. Do you think your old relationships are more valuable now as you participate in LAG?
9. Do you believe that new relationships are valuable and that you are benefiting or will benefit from them in the future?
10. What other benefits of participation can you think of for you?
11. What was your motivation to get involved in a Local Action Group?
12. What is your role in local society?
13. Did your role in gmina and your community changed because of LEADER?
14. Do you think that as a member of LAG you are able to better influence tourism decision-making?
15. What was your motivation to get involved in a Local Action Group?
16. Do you think that the opinions of other stakeholders matter?
17. What methods were used to encourage you to participation in the process of strategy development and membership in LAG?
18. Do you feel that meetings about tourism development were well organized
19. Did you feel that participants were able to express views and opinions as well as present their proposals?
20. What communication channels or forms of information sharing about ongoing tourism development activities do you prefer?
21. Do you think that through membership in a Local Action Group you have more impact on the outcomes of tourism decisions making?
22. Were your opinions, values and point of view respected in the process of strategy development?
23. What could be the reasons for decreased interest in local strategy and general participation in LAG activities?
24. Do you think that people were interested in participation in LAG meetings and decision-making?
25. What do you think about strategy building process.
26. Do you think more people will get involved in a LAG? Do you think you will get involved in other local actions in the future?

APPENDIX C

Interview Schedule

Director of LAG I Office:	08.26.2010
Small Agritourism Owner:	09.02.2010
Local Artist:	09.01.2010
Owner of Small Agritourism Business:	09.10.2010
Father:	09.13.2010
Son:	09.17.2010
Restaurant Owner:	09.20.2010
Accommodation Owner:	08.31.2010
Tour Guide:	09.31.2010
Farmer I:	07.27.2010
New Accommodation Owner:	08.31.2010
Skeptic:	08.28.2010
President of Local Tourism Organization:	09.14.2010
Farmer II:	08.05.2010
Small Local Agriculture Owner:	09.06.2010
President of the LAG II Decision Board:	09.04.2010
Cycling Association:	09.02.2010
Director of the LAG II office:	08.11.2010
Social Representative:	09.02.2010
Authorities Representative:	09.19.2010