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The Municipality's Development Strategy as a Tool for Supporting Social Participation and Local Initiatives

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Abstract:

Purpose: *The aim of this article is to present the municipality's development strategy as a tool supporting social participation and local initiatives. It analyzes the mechanisms for involving residents, non-governmental organizations, and auxiliary units in the process of creating and implementing the strategy, as well as the importance of grassroots activities for the sustainability of development effects. The article analyzes communication in local community management based on a 2025 study on the importance of communication in public administration, its functions, directions of information flow, and challenges for local government. The empirical part presents the results of a survey among village leaders concerning the quality of cooperation with the local government, forms of contact, and the role of the village leader in the co-decision-making process.*
Design/methodology/approach: *The study is theoretical and analytical in nature, based on a review of the literature, legal acts, and case studies. SWOT analysis was used as a tool for assessing strategic conditions, and participatory models, including the participatory-expert model, were identified.*
Findings: *A municipal development strategy that takes into account mechanisms for public consultation and local initiatives (participatory budgeting, local initiatives, tri-sector partnerships) increases the accuracy of the diagnosis, acceptance of the document, and effectiveness of the implementation of objectives. The inclusion of auxiliary units and residents in the planning process promotes the building of social capital and transparency of activities.*
Practical implications: *The use of participatory methods in strategy development allows for better adaptation of the document to the real needs of the local community, strengthens social control, and minimizes the risk of conflicts. The mechanisms indicated can be used by local governments as tools to increase the effectiveness of development management.*

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Originality/value: *The article emphasizes the importance of strategy as not only a planning instrument, but also a social one, integrating various forms of participation and grassroots initiatives. It points to practical models of cooperation (participatory-expert, tri-sectoral) and the role of consultation in building sustainable local development effects.*

Keywords: *Municipal development strategy, social participation, local initiatives, budgeting, governance.*

JEL Codes: *H70, D72, R58, O21.*

Paper type: *Research article.*

1. Introduction

A municipality's development strategy is one of the most important tools for managing local development. Its importance stems from the need to plan activities in the long term, while taking into account social, economic, and spatial conditions. The contemporary understanding of strategy goes beyond traditional military connotations, covering a wide range of applications in public administration, the economy, and development policy.

A strategic document not only sets out directions for action, but also integrates various sectoral policies, supports decision-making processes, and enables public participation. An introduction to the subject of strategy requires a discussion of its definition, legal basis, the role of vision and goals, and the analytical tools that determine the effectiveness of planning.

2. Strategy and Vision of Objectives in Local Government Administration

The municipality development strategy is a fundamental policy document that serves as the primary strategic planning instrument in local government units (Uszkur, 2023). Its essence is the integration of three key dimensions of development: social, economic, and spatial, which ensures the consistency of actions in the long term.

The social dimension includes creating conditions conducive to improving the quality of life of residents, developing human capital, and strengthening social bonds. The economic dimension focuses on stimulating local entrepreneurship, increasing investment attractiveness, and creating the foundations for sustainable economic growth.

The spatial dimension, on the other hand, concerns the rational use of space, the development of technical and social infrastructure, and environmental protection, in accordance with the principles of spatial order (Kudłacz, 2015).

As a policy document, the strategy does not contain detailed operational solutions, but sets out a framework for sectoral policies and implementation programs, enabling municipal authorities to effectively exploit development opportunities and minimize risks arising from external and internal conditions. It is also a document necessary for the effective management of the municipality, raising funds for investments, and involving the community in local affairs (Handbook for Municipalities).

Reorganizations in municipal governments have equipped local authorities with tools to influence local socio-economic structures. Creating local government policy, its development directions, and in particular, taking advantage of opportunities and minimizing threats are important issues from the point of view of municipal authorities (Skica, 2020). The above tasks highlight the need to adopt a forward-looking vision of goals and a targeted strategy of action.

Strategy in the classical sense primarily concerned military operations. The term strategy comes from the Greek word stratós, which means army, while ago should be understood as I command, I lead (Szubrycht, 2013). The concept of "strategy" is ambiguous and dynamic—its meaning has evolved along with the development of management sciences and organizational practice.

Traditionally, strategy was identified with military actions aimed at gaining an advantage over the enemy through planning and responding to their movements. Today, however, the scope of strategy has expanded significantly to encompass various areas of social, economic, and political life. Strategy is understood as a long-term plan of action that allows organizations, including local government units, to take advantage of development opportunities, minimize threats, and adapt to unforeseen situations.

Since 2020, the municipality development strategy has been legally enshrined in the Local Government Act. Articles 10e–10f define the rules for its development, its optional nature, and the requirements for its content, including strategic objectives, directions for action, and expected results. This document forms the basis for local development planning in the long term.

The strategy sets out, among other things, models of functional and spatial structure, spatial policy, and guidelines on how to achieve the objectives. Thanks to this, the strategy serves as a tool integrating the social, economic, and spatial dimensions, ensuring the consistency of the municipality's actions and their compliance with higher-level documents (the Local Government Act).

The second desirable element in the strategy development process is having a vision of the goals, understood as an idea of the desired state – "how it should be." This vision should be clarified through supporting questions that allow its details to be specified. The vision should not be equated with the strategy, as it is an early stage of strategic planning. The definition of a vision is therefore a subjective picture of the

future, created by a person who indicates the direction of development. When formulating goals, the SMART method (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound) is particularly useful, as it allows goals to be defined as specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (Lee, 2025).

The vision of the goals is to show the final state, while the strategy indicates what needs to be done to achieve that state. The strategy becomes a focused basis for plans that take into account the environment, conditions, and opportunities, and its content should be a realistic reflection of the vision (Grant Thornton Polska, 2020).

Nowadays, the strategy development process increasingly takes into account public consultation mechanisms that allow residents to be involved in defining the vision and goals.

Local participation strengthens the legitimacy of the document, increases its acceptance, and facilitates the implementation of its objectives, as confirmed by research on the effectiveness of strategic planning in local government administration (Kruger, 2024).

The strategy therefore not only serves a planning function, but also becomes a tool for supporting social dialogue and building social capital in the municipality. As a result, the strategic document reflects both the needs of the authorities and the expectations of the local community, which promotes sustainable development and the durability of the planned actions.

Creating a vision of goals and then a strategy based on it is a complex process requiring a series of preparations and an in-depth analysis of the environment to which it relates. The vision of goals, and subsequently the strategy, should be based on a detailed assessment of the environment through the use of analytical methods, public consultations, and qualitative research, such as interviews with key stakeholders.

Involving the local community in the planning process helps to increase the legitimacy of the document and its compliance with the actual needs of residents (Kruger, 2024). One of the basic tools used in this process is SWOT analysis, which allows for the systematic definition of strengths and weaknesses, as well as the identification of development opportunities and threats.

This technique allows not only for the assessment of the current position of a local government unit, but also for the determination of its potential, development prospects, and strategic directions. SWOT analysis becomes the foundation for optimizing management strategy, ensuring its consistency with internal and external conditions and increasing the effectiveness of strategic goal implementation (Kuzior and Wroński 2024).

3. Preliminary Research

The study was addressed to village leaders in the municipality of Janów Podlaski, as representatives of local communities, acting as intermediaries between the municipal authorities and residents. Respondents completed a short questionnaire developed on the basis of the project assumptions. The questions concerned, among other things, the quality of cooperation with the office, experiences related to co-decision-making on investments in the municipality, and the role of the village administrator in this process.

The research was preliminary research in nature and paves the way for further, in-depth analysis, including implementation studies. All responses were anonymous and used solely for scientific purposes.

Among the 18 survey participants, 61% were men and 39% were women. The data indicate a moderate predominance of men in the study group, which should be taken into account when interpreting the results. The educational background of the participants in the study group was as follows:

- primary education – 1 person (5.6%),
- secondary education – 6 people (33.3%),
- vocational education – 6 people (33.3%),
- higher education – 5 people (27.8%).

The analysis showed that most respondents had secondary or vocational education, and more than a quarter had higher education. Only one participant in the study had primary education. Within the study group, respondents differed in terms of the length of time they had served as village leaders, as follows: 1 term – 8 people (44.4%), 2 terms – 6 people (33.3%), 3 terms – 1 person (5.6%), 4 terms – 1 person (5.6%), 5 terms – 2 people (11.1%) and more than 6 terms – 0 people (0%).

The analysis of the data shows that the majority of respondents have served as village leaders for one or two terms, which indicates a relatively high turnover and an influx of new people involved in social activities. At the same time, there is a group of village leaders with longer experience – three or more terms – which confirms the presence of stable leaders who enjoy the trust of the residents.

Their experience can be an important support in the process of building a development strategy for the municipality. The results suggest that both experienced and newly elected village leaders coexist in local communities, which promotes a balance between continuing existing activities and introducing new initiatives.

One of the survey questions asked respondents to assess the role of the village leader in the municipality's investment activities. The aim was to find out their opinions on the scope of tasks and expectations of this function in the context of cooperation with

the municipal authorities. The most frequently mentioned function was the informational role – providing residents with reliable information and explaining issues related to municipal investments, which was indicated by 14 respondents.

This emphasizes the importance of the village administrator as a key link in the efficient flow of information between the community and the municipal office. In second place was caring for the welfare of the village and its residents (13 responses), understood as caring for the development of the village and meeting the needs of the community.

Another important aspect was care and assistance in solving problems and dealing with official matters (11 people). A slightly smaller percentage of respondents indicated administrative tasks, such as tax collection or delivery of orders (10 people). Organizing cooperation with residents and other entities was considered important in 8 cases, and mediating between the community and the municipal authorities in 7 cases. Six respondents recognized the need to make final decisions on matters concerning the village, while five pointed to the integrative function of building community and mobilizing residents.

In summary, village leaders see their role primarily as informational and supportive of local community development, which indicates a need to strengthen communication mechanisms between residents and the municipal office.

Respondents assessed the level of support from the municipal office in the implementation of local activities as follows. Seven people declared full support, while 11 people declared partial support. None of the participants indicated the answers “difficult to say,” “limited support,” or “no support.”

The results show that most village leaders feel at least partial support from the office, which indicates the existence of cooperation, although in many cases it requires further strengthening and clarification of support mechanisms. Village leaders declared that the municipal office provides them with full or partial support. The lack of indications of a lack of assistance or limited support indicates a positive assessment of cooperation.

However, the predominance of “partial support” responses (11 people) indicates a need to strengthen assistance, e.g., through additional resources, training, or simplification of procedures. The high level of declared support can serve as a foundation for building more integrated mechanisms for cooperation and implementing the municipality's development strategy.

Respondents to the question concerning planned investments in the municipality and methods of informing about them gave the following answers: during Municipal Council sessions – 17 people, in person – 6 people, by telephone – 4 people, by letter (official letter) – 1 person, by email – 1 person, other – 0 people.

The dominant channel of communication is participation in Municipal Council sessions (94% of respondents), which indicates the formal nature of information transfer. Direct forms of contact, such as personal conversations (33%) or telephone calls (22%), are used much less frequently. Electronic (email) and written communication are marginal (5.6% each). The lack of references to other forms may indicate limited use of modern communication tools.

Conclusions in the context of the commune's development strategy point to the need to diversify communication channels – the current model, based mainly on Commune Council sessions, is insufficient for quick and effective communication about investments.

Strengthening the informational role of the village administrator as a local leader and equipping them with tools (e.g., access to an online platform, informational materials) would contribute to the effective communication of information to residents. Integrating communication with the strategy development process – effective exchange of information between the office, village leaders, and residents is key to participatory investment planning and building a municipal development strategy.

Conclusions based on research point to the development of a multi-channel communication system, including digital tools and information materials for village leaders. Experienced village leaders are an important element in local activities and should be involved in the process of creating a municipality development strategy as local experts. The high level of declared support from the authorities provides a good basis for building integrated mechanisms for cooperation and implementing new initiatives.

4. Strategy as a Tool for Participation

The process of creating a municipality development strategy is increasingly based on the principles of social participation, which ensure greater transparency and effectiveness of activities. The contemporary approach to strategic planning assumes not only the participation of experts, but also the active involvement of residents, non-governmental organizations, and local entrepreneurs.

Public consultations and bottom-up initiatives, such as participatory budgeting and tri-sector partnerships, are becoming key tools in the process of shaping strategic documents. As a result, the strategy is not just an administrative document, but reflects the real needs of the local community, strengthens social capital, and increases the sustainability of the planned actions.

The participatory-expert model is the recommended method for preparing a municipality's development strategy, combining expert analysis (by urban planners, sociologists, economists) with the active participation of a community team appointed by the municipal authorities. Experts provide substantive analyses and assessments

(e.g., legal compliance, resources, economic potential), while the community team engages the local community, enabling them to have a real impact on the shape of the document. This solution combines reliable theoretical knowledge with local civic knowledge, strengthening the accuracy of the diagnosis and acceptance of the strategy (Rico Motos, Font, Bherer, Smith 2021).

A variety of techniques are used in the public consultation process:

- thematic workshops, e.g., urban planning or economic workshops,
- public debates, enabling the exchange of views and identification of the most important issues,
- online surveys, used to quickly gather opinions from a wide audience,
- citizen panels, involving representative groups of residents in an in-depth analysis of issues,
- open meetings, enabling direct contact between residents and authorities and experts.

This multi-channel approach promotes inclusiveness and increases the accessibility of the process for different social groups. Consultations should last at least 35 days and include:

- residents,
- NGOs,
- entrepreneurs,
- authorities and organizations from neighboring municipalities.

The aim is to gather a wide range of opinions, identify needs and concerns, and take them into account in the strategy, which increases its legitimacy and effectiveness (Wiza, 2021).

In practice, the following forms of consultation are used:

- thematic workshops (e.g., SWOT analysis of various dimensions),
- public debates,
- online surveys,
- citizen panels,
- open meetings.

This approach promotes inclusiveness, diversity of opinion, and transparency of the process (Wiza, 2021).

Public consultations are a key element of the process of creating a municipality development strategy, as they enable the involvement of residents and other stakeholders in shaping the strategic document. Their importance goes beyond a

formal requirement – they are a tool for building trust, legitimacy, and quality of planning. A strategy developed on the basis of consultations is perceived as more credible and democratic.

The participation of the local community in the decision-making process increases the acceptance of the document and facilitates its implementation (Rajca, 2022; Solner, 2022). The opinions of residents, non-governmental organizations, and entrepreneurs allow for a better understanding of local needs and problems. As a result, the strategy is more relevant to the actual socio-economic conditions (Kruger, 2024).

Consultations promote community integration, strengthen the sense of shared responsibility for the development of the municipality, and foster a culture of dialogue. In the long term, they increase the municipality's capacity to implement collaborative projects (Petunia and Selepe, 2020).

The consultation process increases the transparency of local government activities, enables social control, and reduces the risk of conflicts resulting from a lack of information or insufficient consideration of the interests of different groups (Augustyniak, 2017).

The most commonly used forms of public consultation are:

- thematic workshops,
- public debates,
- online surveys,
- citizen panels,
- open meetings (Madej, 2024).

A study based on the opinions of village leaders from the municipalities of Janów Podlaski and Przywidz showed that representatives of auxiliary units, as people well acquainted with local needs, play the role of key consultants in the process of formulating municipal strategies. Their knowledge and experience point to the importance of taking into account grassroots reflections and local community initiatives (Dudziuk, 2024).

Auxiliary units can participate both in the problem diagnosis stage (e.g., by identifying social and infrastructural priorities) and in monitoring the implementation of strategies at the local level. Dudziuk points out that their involvement increases the accuracy of the diagnosis and allows for the implementation of more precise solutions (Dudziuk, 2024).

Local initiatives play a key role in the implementation of municipal development strategies, as they enable the integration of grassroots activities of residents with the strategic goals of the municipality. As a participatory tool, participatory budgeting

allows residents to decide on part of municipal expenditures, especially those related to infrastructure. Including it in the strategy is a mechanism that increases the effectiveness of public spending and legitimizes the document in the eyes of the local community (Dubicki, 2021; Owczarczyk, 2023).

Local initiatives enable residents, either directly or through NGOs, to submit proposals for public tasks (e.g., road repairs, educational activities, green space protection). Including this mechanism in the strategy allows the ideas of the local community to be taken into account in municipal action plans, increasing their relevance, acceptance, and sustainability (Act on Public Benefit Activity).

A tri-sector partnership is a collaboration between local government, the private sector, and non-governmental organizations in the implementation of public objectives. This model, which is part of the idea of new public management, promotes the synergy of resources, knowledge, and competences of different sectors, contributing to innovative solutions and better adaptation of strategies to local needs (Blicharz, 2008).

The benefits of integrating local initiatives into the strategy include, above all, increased efficiency of activities through the use of residents' knowledge and resources, and faster and more effective implementation of activities than in the case of official management alone. Actions based on grassroots initiatives have a higher level of resident involvement and care for projects, which contributes to their long-term implementation and sustainability.

Cooperation between the municipality, business, and NGOs builds trust and solidarity, strengthens local identity and civic dialogue, and plays a key role in strengthening social capital (Blicharz, 2008).

5. Conclusions, Proposals, Recommendations

The analyses confirm that the municipal development strategy is not only a planning document, but also a key social tool for managing local development. Its value increases when it integrates social, economic and spatial dimensions and is built with active involvement of residents, auxiliary units and non-governmental organisations.

The case of Janów Podlaski shows that combining strategic planning with participation and communication mechanisms strengthens social capital, improves the quality of diagnosis and facilitates the implementation of development objectives.

The findings indicate that a strategy based on public consultations, participatory budgeting, local initiatives and tri-sector partnerships is more responsive to real local needs. The participatory-expert model allows for combining expert knowledge with the practical experience of residents and village leaders, which leads to more realistic priorities and greater acceptance of the strategy.

At the same time, the study among village leaders highlights the central role of communication: they primarily see themselves as providers of information and support for residents in contacts with the municipal office. The declared support from the office is relatively high, yet communication still relies mainly on traditional channels, which limits the speed and inclusiveness of information flows.

On this basis, several practical recommendations can be formulated. First, it is advisable to strengthen information exchange mechanisms between the municipal office, village leaders and residents through regular meetings, clear procedures and transparent feedback channels.

Second, village leaders should receive more systematic support – training, access to information and organisational help – so that they can act not only as messengers, but also as local animators and partners in co-decision-making.

Third, the municipality should diversify communication channels by complementing council sessions with websites, social media, online consultations and digital platforms, thus reaching different social groups more effectively.

Finally, participatory tools should be embedded as permanent elements of strategic and operational management. Participatory budgeting, local initiatives and tri-sector partnerships need regular evaluation to adjust them to changing expectations of the community. The example of Janów Podlaski confirms that a participatory, communication-oriented approach to strategy-making increases the effectiveness and durability of local development activities, while also pointing to the need for broader comparative research in other municipalities.

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