

Daria Murawska\*

## The local face of NGOs in Poland

STUDIA I ANALIZY

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**Abstract:** *The recognition of NGOs is increasing every year, but they are still identified with large, usually nationwide entities, and it is local NGOs that are closest to the community and know its needs. In the 2015 survey, as many as 40% of respondents had no association with a non-governmental organization. From this perspective, an interesting issue is the analysis of the local face of non-governmental organizations and the specificity of their activities in the local dimension and for the benefit of local communities.*

### Introduction

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are called the pillar of civil society. Without an active third sector, one cannot imagine a well-functioning democratic state. On the other hand, it is the activities undertaken by non-governmental organizations that are often hardly recognizable and identified with the organization's activities. Only a few years of the topic, as many as 42% of Poles declared that during the last year they had not come across the activities of NGOs, and 40% did not

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\* ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6035-4535>, PhD, Institute of Sociological Sciences and Pedagogy at the Warsaw University of Life Sciences – SGGW; email: [daria\\_murawska@sggw.edu.pl](mailto:daria_murawska@sggw.edu.pl)

associate the term NGO at all. Only 13% declared participation in the activities of non-governmental organizations last year. What's more, it was the local organizations operating in a given community that should be the most recognizable which had the biggest problems in recruiting people to cooperate with.

From numerous reports and analyzes, we can learn about the characteristics of NGOs operating in local communities and the countryside. An interesting issue is to present how their role and importance in local development looks today.

The operation of the organization in their local dimension, with particular emphasis on rural activities, will be presented in a non-limiting text. The perspective and possibilities of organizations operating in large cities, acting for the benefit of the local, e.g. neighbourly community, are different from those operating in the countryside.

The article uses a literature review and analysis of existing data, including published statistical data and thematic reports.

## **Characteristics of local non-governmental organizations**

Due to the applicable legal regulations in Poland, the third sector, in addition to foundations and associations, includes many entities, including social economy entities, social religious entities, economic and professional self-government, hunting associations, agricultural circles and Volunteer Fire Brigades, which in the light of regulations legal regulations in Poland are registered as associations. The data for 2018 shows that there were 88,100 associations and similar social organizations, including foundations, social denominations, and economic and professional self-government organizations<sup>1</sup>.

This formal and legal diversity of various types of entities included in the third sector is of key importance from the perspective of organizations operating in the countryside and small towns. As for local organizations, they are "first and foremost parish communities and other groups gathered around the Church, the Village Housewives' Circle and Volunteer Fire Brigades. In the first two cases, it is difficult to estimate the number of people they engage in their activities. It is easier in the case

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<sup>1</sup> D. Dąbrowski, E. Makowska-Belta, *Działalność stowarzyszeń i podobnych organizacji społecznych, fundacji, społecznych podmiotów wyznaniowych oraz samorządu gospodarczego i zawodowego w 2018 r. – wyniki wstępne. Informacje Sygnalne*, Departament Badań Społecznych i Urząd Statystyczny w Krakowie, Kraków 2019, p. 1.

of Volunteer Fire Brigades – 16,000 organizations of this type involve almost 700,000 members. What's more, there are the most Volunteer Fire Brigades where there are fewer associations and foundations"<sup>2</sup>.

From a legal point of view, the situation changed when it comes to the Farmers' Wives Associations, which were included in the structures of the Union of Farmers, Circles, and Agricultural Organizations (*Związek Rolników, Kółek i Organizacji Rolniczych – ZRKiOR*). However, for two years they have been operating based on the provisions of the Act on the circles of village housewives. This does not change the fact that from a rural perspective they play a similar role as TSOs. Until now, it has been difficult to estimate their exact number. What is more, some of the Farmers' Wives Associations registered in the form of associations. Ilona Matysiak presented the problem with the estimation of the number of the Farmers' Wives Associations (*Koła Gospodyń Wiejskich*) in Poland. Currently, this issue is regulated by the provisions of the Act, which require a mandatory entry in the National Register of Farmers' Wives Associations, kept by the Agency for Restructuring and Modernization of Agriculture. To date, over 9,000 the Farmers' Wives Associations is available in the register<sup>3</sup>.

Regarding the structure of non-profit organizations by type of town, "the ratio of the number of non-profit organizations located in cities to those located in the countryside was 3:2. This proportion corresponds to the population in cities to the number of inhabitants in the countryside. The only voivodships in which organizations having their headquarters in the countryside predominated: Świętokrzyskie, Opolskie, and Podkarpackie. In the Lubelskie voivodship, the organization was divided into urban and rural areas. Organizations located in cities most strongly prevailed in the Warsaw capital region (88.8%), which also affected the entire Mazowieckie voivodship (74.1%)"<sup>4</sup>.

If we look at the data on the scope of operations of third sector entities, the local dimension of the business is visible. The largest part of the units operated mainly on a local scale and did not exceed the area of the commune (36.2%), 20.4% of the units operated in the powiat, the

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<sup>2</sup> P. Adamiak, *Inny trzeci sektor*, 2014, <https://publicystyka.ngo.pl/inny-trzeci-sektor> (06.06.2020).

<sup>3</sup> Data as of 06.06.2020 is 9018 Farmers' Wives Associations registered with the National Register of Farmers' Wives Associations.

<sup>4</sup> K. Goś-Wójcicka, *Sektor non-profit w 2016 r. Stowarzyszenia, fundacje, społeczne podmioty wyznaniowe, samorząd gospodarczy i zawodowy*, Departament Badań Społecznych, Główny Urząd Statystyczny, Urząd Statystyczny w Krakowie, Warszawa, Kraków 2018, p. 118.

voivodship indicated as the maximum area of activities 16.9% of the units, and the national scale 21%. Agricultural circles had the most local dimension of activity, as much as 84.9% operated locally<sup>5</sup>.

The main recipients of non-profit activities were natural persons. As much as 88.2% directed their activities to them than for other entities (24.6%), while over 2/3 of the organizations directed their direct activities only to natural persons (66.3%). This is also confirmed by data indicating that local organizations more often declare “undertaking activities oriented solely for the benefit of their members or charges (36%), and less frequently acting exclusively for external beneficiaries (16%).” The model that most often dominates their activities is striving to spend time together and develop interests. As much as 42% of local organizations approach their activities in this way<sup>6</sup>.

Interesting characteristics regarding the profile of non-governmental organizations operating in the countryside were created by the Klon/Jawor Association, which adopts a narrow definition of non-governmental organizations, examining only registered foundations and associations (excluding TSOs). As for a typical organization operating in the countryside, most often it is an association or sports club, whose main area of activity is a sport as well as culture and art. The scale of their organic activity is primarily in the neighbourhood, commune, and powiat. They usually operate based on the social work of the people involved. The structure of the board also looks stable, which has not changed, often since its creation. Compared to other organizations, they have the smallest budget – on average at the level of 25,000 PLN annually. Their main source of financing usually funds from local governments. The main values that guide their business are integrity, care for the common good, and trust<sup>7</sup>.

According to data from the report of the Klon/Jawor Association, 25% of organizations are based in the countryside, and 24% in a small town (up to 50,000 inhabitants), almost 50% of all organizations surveyed. Their scale of activity also has a local dimension, 4% works for the nearest neighborhood, 31% on the scale of the commune, powiat, and 25% on the scale of the voivodship, region, as much as 60% of all surveyed organizations<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibidem, p. 32.

<sup>6</sup> P. Adamiak, *Inny trzeci sektor...*

<sup>7</sup> B. Charycka, M. Gumkowska, *Kondycja organizacji pozarządowych 2018*, Stowarzyszenie Klon/Jawor, Warszawa 2019, p. 62.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, p. 10.

The local dimension of NGOs is also evident in the analysis of their immediate environment and key partners. One of the two most important partners with whom organizations maintain contact, along with other NGOs (88%) in the local community (86%) as well as local government (84%) and local media (77%)<sup>9</sup>.

When it comes to differences between organizations operating in villages and small towns, an important factor differentiating them is their “activity”, which is related to irregularly conducting business, subordinated to specific events, outside of which there is not much more happening. “The most common activity of foundations and associations from villages and small towns is to organize various events: festivities, competitions, concerts”. Another characteristic feature associated with the form is the fairly homogeneous way of taking action. Local organizations more often than in large cities focus only on one chosen method of work. As many as 70% of the surveyed organizations declared that they carried out the same activities invariably. It is related to the resources of these organizations and reliance on social work. According to the data, “less than half of the members of the NGOs surveyed get involved. Comparing these data with the information that the number of over 80% of the surveyed organizations is in the range of up to 50 people shows a relatively limited base of human resources that can be managed by managers of non-governmental organizations”. Relying on limited human resources seems to significantly distinguish organizations from rural areas from other entities of the third sector. “Any paid staff (regardless of the form of employment) have less than a third of them, while in larger cities almost half use paid work. A multitude of other duties, including professional ones, decide that social activists of organizations outside larger cities cannot devote as much time to their institutions as they would like”<sup>10</sup>.

This is probably related to the activity and functioning of those organizations that due to the local dimension are not of a mass nature. Mostly they are small organizations that do not involve their members too much. This state of affairs may be influenced by the fact that these local organizations are characterized by inward-facing activities. “Only half of associations and foundations outside larger cities use the help of external volunteers, more often basing their activities on the social work of members and members or authorities”<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, p. 57.

<sup>10</sup> P. Adamiak, *Imy trzeciego sektora...*

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem.

**Table 1.** Characteristic of local NGOs

Types of local NGOs	Characteristic
A profiled organization	They arose in response to real needs and problems; act for the benefit of others; if they recognize the needs and expectations well, they have a good chance of success, and thus survival and even development. Not being able to decide on the course of action, it often breaks down, which results in the termination of activities. Fundraising is committed to goals.
Club organization (including sports)	They bring together people with similar interests and relatively often demographic features. They meet the needs of spending time together and pursuing a hobby. Cyclical meetings are a typical form of activity. Members of the organization are unlikely to act for the benefit of others outside the circle, but they like to present their achievements outside.
“Departments” of the commune office	Associations and foundations that arose from the establishment of commune employees to obtain external funds for NGOs. They become a de facto additional financial and accounting department of the commune. The members are office employees, without any changes in the composition or recruitment of new people.
“Institution extenders”	A similar profile and origin of the uprising, as in the case of “departments” of the commune office. Most often, they are created by employees of local institutions such as schools, cultural centers, and OPS. Established to obtain additional sources of financing (apart from those from the commune budget) or to implement a single task. Over time, they expand their activities. They acquire new members and implement projects, develop their activities due to new members and beneficiaries. Activities go beyond the functions of the mother institution. Over time, they can become independent of the mother institution, even despite the initial symbiosis.
Quasi election committees	They bring together people whose main goal is to enter local government structures. Established before the election or intensify their activities during the campaign, and outside of this period are not very active. There are situations that they continue to operate between elections as “institution extenders” when the person managing the organization gets into local government structures.
Local support organizations	In their activities they are similar to infrastructure organizations from large cities, only they operate at a lower level; commune, city, or poviát. They have their headquarters, employ employees. In their activities, they focus on supporting other, less professional organizations. Their employees are well versed in commune matters. They understand the importance of building relations between the third sector and local government administration.

continued Table 1

Local Media	They arise as an initiative of one or two people. After some time, their activity is formalized as an association or foundation. At the root of the assumption is a journalist's passion and / or dissatisfaction with the level of local politics. Most of all other types base their activities on available technologies. From a local authority perspective, they become an ally or rival.
Business organizations	Organizations whose purpose is to protect the interests of people from the same industry (especially agriculture). They give concerts on members and economic issues. Sometimes they act as a spokesperson. They rarely take action for a wider community.
Self-help organizations	Most often they are associations that were founded on the initiative of people struggling with the problem. Initially, they only act for the benefit of people gathered around the organization. It happens that they broaden the scope of their activities and direct support to other groups. They differ from profiled organizations by carrying out activities only for their group.

Source: own compilation based on H. Borowski, M. Wiśnicka, *Technologie dla trzeciego sektora. Raport z badań*, Warsaw 2011, pp. 42–45.

It is interesting to know the models of organization management, which is indicated as characteristic for entities operating in the countryside and small towns. The first of these is the leadership model that characterizes grassroots organizations. The key here is the person of the leader, his commitment, and undertaken activity, which takes on managing the organization. The structure of such organizations is centralized. The second model was called “distributed”, which is characteristic of organizations based on partnerships, such as partner groups or local action groups, centers of local activity. Several institutions and people are involved in this model and there is no clear “decision-making center”<sup>12</sup>.

An interesting perspective on local NGOs is provided by the typology created for the project “Technologie dla trzeciego sektora. Raport z badania”. This is the result of field experience, based on the study of only local organizations that operated in villages and small towns. Within this typology, the following types of organizations were distinguished: profiled organization, club organization (including sports organization), “departments” of the commune office, “institution extenders”, quasi

<sup>12</sup> W. Goszczyński, R. Kamiński, W. Knieć, *Dylemat linoskoczka, czyli o profesjonalizacji autentyczności i perspektywach rozwoju organizacji pozarządowych na wsi i w małych miastach*, Toruń–Warszawa 2013, pp. 80–81.

electoral committees, local supporting organizations, local media, business organizations, self-help organizations<sup>13</sup>. (Table 1)

As we can see, the characteristics of local NGOs, especially those operating in the countryside and small towns, may not be as homogeneous as it might seem. However, what connects them is the local dimension of the business, regardless of the origin, resources, or beneficiaries. And in this dimension, it is worth perceiving their role and importance for the local community.

### **The role and importance of non-governmental organizations in the development of local communities**

The active activity of third sector entities in the local dimension, especially in the villages, can be referred to as the functions they perform about human needs, as pointed out by Aleksander Kamiński. He identified three main functions, such as affiliative, integrative, and expressive<sup>14</sup> that organizations also meet when operating on a local level. The affiliate function, which is expressed in group work and connecting with other people, seems to be particularly visible. Looking at the data on the direction of activity for its members, the expressive function that allows individuals to express themselves and strive for self-realization is visible. The integrating role that unites the group and the environment is also important in this dimension.

From a local perspective, other functions of non-governmental organizations seem to be key, including supporting the development of an individual (biological, social, cultural); preparation for social and professional roles (...); enriching the spheres of life and individual activity (understanding and shaping reality, seeking expression and community); disseminating instrumental knowledge and shaping specific attitudes, as well as developing and implementing the idea of democracy<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> As the authors themselves point out, this is not a universal typology, it intentionally simplifies and also highlights certain aspects of the presented types of organizations, which will mean that certain types may not suit actual organizations. Most of the locally functioning organizations will rather show some features consistent with the types presented. Some of these types, as the authors themselves indicate, can be regarded as stages of development for some organizations.

<sup>14</sup> A. Kamiński, *Funkcje pedagogiki społecznej: praca socjalna i kulturalna*, Warszawa 1982, pp. 155–158.

<sup>15</sup> A. Winiarski, *Funkcje organizacji i stowarzyszeń społecznych w środowisku lokalnym*, [in:] T. Plich, I. Lepalczyk (eds.), *Pedagogika społeczna*, Warszawa 1995, p. 197.

A valuable perspective is presented by R. Skrzypiec, which, analyzing the role of NGOs in local development, indicates their numerous functions, including influencing the authorities and administration of territorial self-governments in various dimensions, advocacy activities and representing various groups, organizing social protests, controlling the quality of exercised power, participating in government decision-making processes, signaling possible social conflicts. Another important local function is the independent provider of social services and conducting educational, recreational, and sports activities. It also emphasizes the role of social innovators, including activities consisting of activity from design to implementation and presentation of alternative development visions. Thanks to the possibility of obtaining funds from external sources, their important role in financing the local social sphere is indicated. They are also a local employer, especially in established social cooperatives<sup>16</sup>.

It is worth remembering, however, that the organization's presence on the local labor market goes beyond just being a local employer. Most often, the activities of local NGOs are focused on supporting the unemployed, especially in terms of training or assistance in finding employment for them. On the other hand, organizations undertake various types of initiatives supporting entrepreneurs<sup>17</sup>. However, there is still a visible lack of "social economy entities, parapublic or para-governmental organizations, the purpose of which would be, for example, the employment of people with disabilities, in other words active, and recently promoted – social cooperatives, professional integration centres, and other such entities"<sup>18</sup>.

NGOs operating in the local environment are assigned a large role, especially in the context of their impact on the development of the local community and sustainable development of rural areas, by influencing the better use of available resources, reducing transaction costs, or contributing to economic growth and social cohesion. Among other important functions that they play in a local dimension, the informational role is also emphasized<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> See R. Skrzypiec, *Organizacje pozarządowe w rozwoju lokalnym – aktywne wspólnoty, sieci i partnerstwo lokalne*, «Pozarządowiec» 2008, No. 7 (97), p. 12.

<sup>17</sup> E. Bogacz-Wojtanowska, *Działania organizacji pozarządowych na lokalnych rynkach pracy na podstawie wybranych powiatów województw małopolskiego i opolskiego*, «Zarządzanie Publiczne» 2009, No. 5, p. 50.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>19</sup> See M. Adamowicz, *Spoleczeństwo lokalne, organizacje pozarządowe i społeczeństwo obywatelskie jako środowisko i przejaw kapitału społecznego na obszarach wiejskich*, «Studia i Prace Wydziału Nauk Ekonomicznych i Zarządzania» 2008, No. 8, p. 14.

An important perspective for considering NGOs, in all dimensions of their activities, including local ones, is their significant contribution to the development of social capital, especially in the context of cooperation between local entities<sup>20</sup>.

## **Overview of the organization's activities in rural areas**

The activities of non-profit organizations in the local dimension take many different forms. However, it is the local dimension of the conducted activities that seems to be crucial if we consider that one of the main objectives of the conducted activities should be cooperation with local partners and the activation of residents.

Interesting examples when it comes to the diversity of implemented projects are provided by the "Civic Local Initiative", which is "a description of models of residents' involvement in local development"<sup>21</sup>, among which are, i.a., thematic villages, protection of monuments, creation of integrating places and areas, charity activities, social actions to solve problems, implementation of services for citizens, social and professional activation and initiatives for the integration of the local community.

Below are selected forms of activity and implemented projects by local NGOs operating in the countryside.

## **Theme villages**

An example of activities that local organizations take on is engaging residents and the local community in setting up thematic villages. The idea of this project assumes taking actions to direct the activity of a given village to one specific topic related to geographical location, history, or an interesting idea. Often the driving force behind activities is the desire to revive a given area. "The creation of thematic villages is becoming increasingly popular in Poland. They usually take the form of an association or informal initiative group, often cooperating with other local organizations. The offer has diversified, activating tourists,

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<sup>20</sup> Por. B. Lewenstein, *Obywatelskie strategie i modele wprowadzania „zmiany społecznej” w miejskich społecznościach lokalnych – doświadczenia amerykańskie*, [in:] M. Wadowicki, Z. Woźniak (eds.), *Aktywność obywatelska w rozwoju społeczności lokalnej*, Warszawa 2001, p. 115.

<sup>21</sup> I. Raszeja-Ossowska, M. Dudek, D. Prędkopowicz (eds.), *Współpraca na rzecz rozwoju społeczności lokalnej. Witryna obywatelska*, Warszawa 2014, p. 52.

usually combining fun with education”<sup>22</sup>. Examples are villages such as Mikułowa – the village of Mikołajów, Jania Góra – the bread village, oats – the village of the round table or Niedźwiedzice – the village of the stork<sup>23</sup>.

## Organization of cultural events

The involvement of local organizations in cultural activities, including the organization of local holidays, such as fairs, festivals, and themed days, is also interesting. When it comes to activity in the sphere of culture, it is declared by almost 40% of organizations, including 6% acting for the nearest neighbourhood and 31% for the commune and powiat<sup>24</sup>. And non-governmental organizations dealing with cultural heritage are the largest in the countryside, as much as 38%, all of which declare activities for the benefit of culture and art (100%), education and upbringing (65%) and sport, tourism, recreation, and hobby (50%)<sup>25</sup>. “About one-third of organizations (31%) declare that they have been involved in the preparation of at least 8 holidays in the last two years; the same percentage (31%) organized or co-organized at this time from 5 to 8 holidays. 36% participated in the organization of a local holiday no more than four times”<sup>26</sup>. The role of non-governmental organizations is not as significant as local government units, but more than 90% of the surveyed organizations took part in the promotion of the event or substantive work on the program, 76% declared dealing with organizational issues along with seeking financing sources<sup>27</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> A. Kłoczko-Gajewska, *Działalność wiosek tematycznych w Polsce i wstępna ocena jej efektów*, «Roczniki Naukowe Ekonomii Rolnictwa i Rozwoju Obszarów Wiejskich» 2015, No. 3, p. 110.

<sup>23</sup> <https://wioska-tematyczna.pl> (06.06.2020).

<sup>24</sup> P. Adamiak et al., *Współpraca w obszarze kultury – samorządy, publiczne, instytucje kultury, organizacje pozarządowe*, Warszawa 2013, p. 14.

<sup>25</sup> P. Adamiak, B. Charycka, *Działania organizacji pozarządowych oraz samorządów w obszarze dziedzictwa kulturowego: współpraca, potrzeby, zaangażowanie wolontariuszy*, Warszawa 2015, pp. 16–17.

<sup>26</sup> B. Charycka, Z. Dworakowska, M. Gumkowska, *Festyny, dni miasta, jarmarki czyli współczesne święta polskie. Perspektywa organizatorów i uczestników*, Warszawa 2017, p. 26.

<sup>27</sup> See *ibidem*, p. 28.

## **Creating integrating places and areas**

One of the places characteristic for rural areas, which mainly plays an integrating role are rural community centres. Local communities can use adapted rooms in many different ways. It is a meeting place of e.g. Farmers' Wives Associations or seniors, a place of the meeting and thematic meetings, e.g. on Women's Day or Children's Day. Some rural community centres focus their activities on the educational function, creating child-friendly and youth-friendly places where they can interestingly spend their free time, but also have the conditions for proper development and socialization. An important role is indicated in providing equal educational opportunities for children and youth. Country clubs also run classes for children.

## **Social innovation**

The role of social innovators was indicated in the functions of organizations operating in the local environment. However, assumptions should be confronted with reality. Social innovations in the countryside are not very common, but they are emerging. "They primarily concern the sphere of personalized services tailored to the needs of specific groups of recipients, although their goal is not always to empower them. (...) they can appear in any local context and be implemented by representatives of various sectors, but as an exception and not as a common practice. The problem is to assess their long-term impact on even selected social problems of rural areas, and thus verify their effectiveness as one of the assumptions accompanying their implementation"<sup>28</sup>.

## **Conclusions**

It seems impossible to talk about local development without the active action of local NGOs and third sector entities. Especially in the context of their integrating, activating, and building social capital functions, from which they also draw resources by conducting their activities.

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<sup>28</sup> K. Zajda, *Wdrażanie innowacji społecznych przez wiejskie organizacje pozarządowe*, «Wieś i Rolnictwo» 2017, No. 4, p. 112, doi: 10.7366/wir042017/06.

However, in the theoretical layer, they are often assigned a greater role and significance than it is reflected in research.

It should be remembered that these organizations are primarily focused on acting for the benefit of their members, they implement projects that, when combined with the projects of organizations from large cities, would seem to be marginal.

However, their contribution to local development cannot be underestimated. Their strength is not innovative, ground breaking projects, but proximity to the beneficiaries, embedding in the local community and understanding the needs of residents, and conducting activities that will allow for gradual development. It is worth remembering that even if the activities implemented by these entities stand by an institution or persons representing local self-government structures or public administration bodies, such as schools, this does not detract from the activities carried out by them, as long as they are of a social nature.

Moreover, their activities cannot be simplified to the local colour. Often their projects, even if their character is action and occasional, have a bonding effect and become the axis of local community development.

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