

Appendix 3: Dolnoslaskie (Poland, NC3)

Organising partner:	University of Wroclaw	Innovation Type
Practice:	Cultural festivals: Creating a more No positive image for peripheral regions (Netherlands, NL4C)	
Practice context:	Netherlands - Various intermediate	
Confrontation context:	Dolnoslaskie (NUTS2, PL51) - Rural	
Workshop location:	Leszczyna, Lower Silesia	
Date:	21st October 2021	

Summary

Cultural festivals are an important element of rural development strategies. The practice of cultural festivals in Oldambt proves how a grassroots initiative of rural newcomers can organically grow into established festivals that successfully combine endogenous and exogenous dimensions of rural development. This confrontation workshop has shown that there is a significant scope for Organising similar events in rural areas of the Lower Silesia region, a comparable region that also underwent the loss of agricultural functions, has many unused cultural heritage objects, and is also partly peripheral. The results of the brainstorming sessions and a focus group organized in Leszczyna indicate that there is a general acceptance and interest in cultural festivals, albeit the desirable scale and character of the events is discussed with respondents leaning more towards lower scale but more frequent and even more rooted events. Indeed, local communities had already organized numerous festivals but with mixed results – in some cases successfully, in others (unexpectedly) without success. Key issues in this context are: (1) leadership, (2) identifying what would be attractive for residents, and (3) scale and character of the events. A number of individual issues such as logistics, funding sources as well as thematic scope are also considered important. In conclusion, it seems that local communities have been inspired by the practice but will adapt it to their

vision and current resources, with an eye to how they could be upscaled sustainably in the future.

Context

The confrontation area for this practice is the NUTS2 PL51 region of Lower Silesia (*Dolnoslaskie*). Lower Silesia is a region located in South-Western Poland and it borders Czechia to the South and Germany to the West. While the region is of course internally differentiated, many of its parts are nonetheless well comparable to the area where the confronted practice takes place, i.e. the Oldambt municipality in the Netherlands. We find four general reasons for this: first, Lower Silesia is a region of high quality soils (in comparison to Poland in general) and thus it has a tradition of agricultural production similar to that of Oldambt. This production, however, has been undergoing profound changes in the last decades – as a consequence of globalization, neoliberal policies, technological development, and urbanization – which resulted in a comparative decrease of the importance that agricultural production had for the region. A symptomatic aspect of this history, coupled with the rise and fall of manufacturing in the 19th/20th century, is a relative abundance of abandoned or degraded architectural heritage, similar to that of Oldambt – which is an important element of the promising practice confronted in this case. Correspondingly, Lower Silesia is a region with the highest number of listed heritage objects in Poland both in absolute numbers as well as per area unit and per inhabitant (NID, 2017). Second, the location of Lower Silesia renders several parts of this region geographically and functionally peripheral to the region or country as such. Third, many peripheral parts of Lower Silesia are currently witnessing partial socio-economic renewal that stems from arrival of newcomers (permanent or part-time), as exemplified by the Klodzko Valley case (Sikorski et al., 2020). At the same time, the region does not seem to be a place for cultural festivals of the type showcased in Oldambt. Whenever festivals are organized, they are limited to a local scale (e.g. traditional festivities related to agriculture) or happen in cities (e.g. movie festivals). A handful of individual events – such as the “Forest festival” (LAS Festival)⁸ or the “Castle Party”⁹ – are located in rural areas of Lower Silesia but they are rather focusing on music, and its specific genres (electronic music in the former case, gothic rock in the latter). Hence, there is significant scope for more broadly convinced cultural festivals that try to relate themselves closely to the local identity – e.g. former agricultural character of the area, architectural heritage, local environment – in the way that Oldambt festivals are doing. In conclusion, while many specific criteria could be drawn here too, it is these four broad phenomena – historical similarities, peripheral areas, some signs of socio-economic renewal, and a lack of similar

⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/events/638711750642287?ref=newsfeed>

⁹ <https://castleparty.com>

events – that generate fruitful conditions for a confrontation of this practice in the Lower Silesia region (or, more precisely, many locations within the Lower Silesia region).

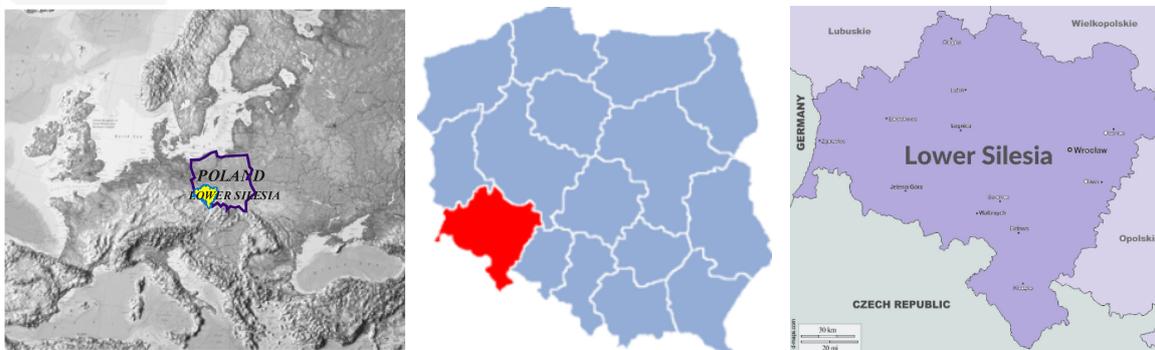


Fig. 1 Location of the Lower Silesia region in Poland

(source: <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/16/14/2601/htm>,
<http://www.resettlement.eu/sites/icmc/files/Lower%20Silesia%201.png> and
<https://wikitravel.org/upload/shared//thumb/d/d1/Dolnoslaskie.PNG/250px-Dolnoslaskie.PNG>)



Fig. 2. Location of the confrontation workshop in Leszczyna. Traditional furnace used for metal production is an example of cultural heritage that can be found in the region (source: Robert Skrzypczynski).

Results

Acceptance and interest in implementing the practice

The participants of the workshops in Leszczyna generally voiced their acceptance of, and interest in, Organising cultural festivals in their respective localities within Lower Silesia. Festivals are considered by them as an important element of both regular rural life as well as broader, strategic development of rural areas. The indirect role of the practice in attracting rural newcomers is also recognized. In fact, many participants had already had some experience in Organising such festivals, albeit at a lower scale (i.e. with fewer participants, shorter duration, lower budget); nevertheless, these events already contributed to a few

newcomers moving to the areas where the events had been held. The experiences of participants also provided interesting insights into potential shortcomings of cultural festivals that gather visitors mostly from other parts of the country, potentially mostly from upper income classes, and with demand for a particular type of events or activities. Therefore, while the general idea of festivals is broadly accepted, there was also a discussion as to how exactly should the community frame and organize them. For instance, some participants clearly stated that they are not interested in festivals of large scale and audience (associated in their view with a particular type of urban-based middle class) but prefer to have more low-profile but frequent and locally-based events, not least due to a preference for more 'intimate' interactions rather than larger gatherings – which often had been the reason to move to a particular rural area in the first place. Some strands of this discussion also shed light on the already experienced barriers for Organising various types of festivals, which in consequence translate into lower eagerness to engage in such practices in the future, as they have proven to be demanding and not always successful in the past. In conclusion, while the respondents are interested in the practice, there are also some signs of distance, possibly even reluctance, that stem from earlier difficulties in successfully Organising similar practices (although events at such a large scale had never been organized) as well as stated preference of lower-scale, more local events.

Identified critical factors related to the implementation of the practice in the context

A number of factors were considered as critical in the implementation of the practice in the context. First, the issue of leadership was brought up: a balance between collective organisation (with appropriate division of tasks) and strong leadership (often embodied by individual leaders) needs to be struck in order for the practice to be successful, especially in the long term when it is organized e.g. yearly. Second, the issue of public perception of festivals in rural areas: the experiences of participants have shown that some types of events unexpectedly gather wide audiences, while others that had been expected to – do not. The process of recognizing what the communities would like to participate in might be therefore demanding and people who have insight into these aspects – what the trends are at a given moment – are very beneficial for the prospects of the initiative. Third, the scale and character of the events matters: it has been argued that low-scale but frequent initiatives might yield better results for the community due to being rooted in their locality; on the other hand, smaller festivals might have less visibility and external recognition that could translate into more visitors from other areas. Furthermore, the participants observed that recurring events tended to gradually lose people's interest, and in consequence it was difficult to keep them running for longer periods. Therefore, it has to be clearly established what the purpose of these events is: is it to attract visitors from outside once per year, or rather to provide a regular meeting place for local residents? Can these two aspects be combined? These three broad

factors – leadership, recognition of needs, as well as the scale and character of the events – constitute the main axes of consideration that occurred during the workshops, although more individual issues will be also discussed below.

Key issues and barriers for implementing the innovative practice in the context

- Dividing responsibilities within strong leadership

The first barrier, related to the issue of leadership, lies in the appropriate division of tasks between the group that organizes the event. The events can be organized in many ways, either more as bottom-up (community groups) or top-down (local administration) initiatives, and mostly as a combination of these two. In any case, it is crucial not to overwhelm leaders with the challenges of Organising such events, as it will not be sustainable in the long run. Hence, there is a need to simultaneously divide tasks horizontally but also to provide space for leaders to act and take decisions so that the momentum of the organisation work is not lost.

- Motivation

Importantly, the original case of the festivals in Oldambt was started by newcomers who felt an internal drive to bring something – cultural festivals, in this case – to their new place of residence. Such motivation should be of course fostered by local communities but it is not always the case that an area has residents that have this internal drive – and such an internal motivation is considered by respondents as an important factor of success. Hence, a lack of newcomers who have an internal motivation to introduce new initiatives can constitute a barrier in the initial periods of trying to establish the practice.

- Knowledge and recognition of needs

Also, in the Oldambt case the knowledge about the demand for such cultural festivals present in urban areas of the Netherlands came from new rural residents who had personal relations with urban dwellers and thus were able to have direct knowledge of what would be attractive for such audiences. Furthermore, they were also able to directly promote the festival via links that might be missing in locations where there are no such newcomers yet. Therefore, a lack of knowledge and communication or promotion channels was considered as a crucial barrier for implementing the practice by the participants of the workshops.

- Prices and overall class-related character of the event

An important barrier for the uptake of the practice is, in the view of the respondents, also the possibility of their 'gentrified' character, best reflected by a simple factor: prices of food provided at similar festivals known by the respondents. In short, food is often provided by food trucks (that might even come from the same place as visitors) at prices that are very high for local residents in comparison to the prices that local sources could provide. However, the demand is such that local sources risk being simply not what the audience wants. Therefore, the barrier is that on the one hand, food trucks do not suit the needs of local residents, and

on the other, local food may not suit the needs of external visitors. The same concern has been voiced more broadly, in relation e.g. to entrance fees but also the entire offer and class distinction (to use Bourdieu's term) of a festival and its visitors: it might be simply an event where local residents might not feel 'at home'.

- Space and logistics

Another barrier brought up by the participants is the necessity to find an appropriate place for larger events and provide infrastructure and the logistic support for the entire event. While the role of e.g. local firemen in traffic management is recognized, it is nonetheless a challenge that so far had never been faced by most communities in small, remote rural settlements. Safety regulations are an additional concern since if the event is organized in a bottom-up, informal manner, then there might be a lack of appropriate expertise in terms of how it should be organized. Facilities such as sanitation points, accommodation, access to water or emergency health care etc. can also pose significant challenges for communities that had never had any experiences with Organising such large events.

- Budget and access to funding sources

Apart from spatial and infrastructural demands, there is also a need to secure budgets for larger events such as those organized in Oldambt. Local municipalities usually have insufficient funds to organize such events and building up the audience that could cover the costs from the fees is a long process (and self-limiting too, because when there is no audience, there is no income from fees, which in turn reduces opportunities for attracting broader audiences by Organising a larger event). All in all, the respondents prefer Organising more local events with local (smaller) funds rather than supralocal events with supralocal funds.

- Maintaining the interest in recurring events

An important barrier is also the difficulty in maintaining constant interest in the recurring event over longer periods. So far, there have been several initiatives in the respective rural areas of participants that seemed successful and yet ceased to exist after a few editions. It is not clear why and what could be done to prevent it; perhaps the offer should vary between years to a sufficient extent, and maybe thinking in terms of thematic editions could help in delivering that goal.

Identified measures and actors that need to be involved to overcome the obstacles and succeed in the implementation of the practice

- Cooperating with local LEADER group in order to access funding sources

Since members of a local LEADER group participated in the meeting, it was explained that the LEADER group has significant knowledge in terms of possible funding sources and can help local activists in Organising events such as the ones discussed within the practice. There are plenty of possible sources here, ranging from local authorities' budgets for cultural events, through regional funds up to European grants – and the LEADER group has a lot of experience in applications as well as project management. Hence, one of the clear measures identified is to turn to the LEADER group with ideas for events, which can overcome three obstacles

mentioned earlier: lack of experience in organisation of events, task division as well as (perceived) difficulties in access to funding sources.

- Planning with a realistic but far-reaching vision

The process of organic development of the festivals over the years is crucial – organizers should ‘be patient’ and have in mind that it might take a long time before the festival becomes established and ‘self-supporting’. Therefore, a realistic long-term plan needs to be conceived first, with phases indicating what could be done and what actors can be engaged at what point.

- Making the effects last longer: location, themes and scale

A solution to the problem of dissolving interest in recurrent events was also proposed – first, to differentiate the theme of the festivals in consecutive years, and second – to organize subsequent editions in different locations of the area (e.g. around different villages). In this way, the leadership could also shift, thus helping in maintaining energy for the organisational work. Finally, it was also suggested that a series of regular, even smaller-scale events could have more long lasting effects as compared to one large event that lasts a few days and does not necessarily have broader effects in other parts of the year.

- Engaging local actors to help with logistics: fire squads, landowners, schools

The problem of significant logistic challenge of Organising cultural festivals can be resolved by e.g. cooperating with local, voluntary fire squads who are well prepared to handle similar issues as they are usually performing this function at local events (security, water provision, waste management, traffic management etc.). Similarly, finding farmers or other landowners who would be willing to lease the land for the location of festivals is considered crucial. As for issues such as accommodation, it has been also suggested that local schools could be used for this, although significant barriers remain in terms of legal regulations on where can people be accommodated (it would be probably challenging to accommodate people in schools due to e.g. access to sufficient sanitary facilities or fire regulations).

- Providing local food and services at the events

Given that the prices – and broadly, class distinction – is a symptomatic barrier in attracting local residents to some cultural festivals, it was proposed that the food at the festival be provided by local initiatives such as the County’s Women Club, albeit with an eye to what would be popular among visitors. Prices would be much lower, local communities would be drawn into the organisation more closely, and visitors could taste local food. There remains, however, the barrier related to logistics (how large could the event be if the food was to be provided in this way? Can it be combined with other sources of food?).

- Making local community integration an explicit goal of the events

Finally, the participants also emphasized that such events can balance the external and internal focus – e.g. attracting visitors from outside but also integrating local communities (and in this way also creating opportunities for future community cooperation on e.g. organisation

of events). To do so, the organizers of the festival should keep an eye to the programme, both in terms of concrete programme elements as well as broader framing of the festival by e.g. emphasizing cultural or natural heritage of the place. It seems that Oldambt festivals manage this aspect very well and it is hoped that it can take place in a similar way in Lower Silesia, having the differences in e.g. the presence of active, engaged newcomers in mind.

Further innovative ideas to foster rural regeneration and development in the context

- Local food

The importance of local food was often brought up in the discussion on how festivals could help with rural development. Examples from nearby regions show how local communities were successful in establishing festivals, markets and events centred on high quality food which attracts both local and external visitors. Workshop participants agreed that it is a key theme to be explored in the context of festivals.

- Returning migrants

The discussion about the promising practice also opened up a motif of attracting not only newcomers but also returning migrants who had been born and raised in the region but then moved elsewhere, e.g. to study. It was argued to be much easier to attract returning migrants than newcomers *par excellence*, and thus programs that identify promising ways of doing that should be developed.

Lessons learned and recommendations

A general lesson learned within the confrontation process is that repeating the success of the cultural festivals in Oldambt will probably depend mostly on creating possibilities for organic development of similar initiatives in other places (such as Lower Silesia). It is very challenging for most areas in Lower Silesia with their current resources to skip the early points of development and try to start already from the point where Oldambt festivals are now, i.e. after more than a decade of functioning. The attention of policymakers should be therefore focused more on earlier steps of the process, i.e. creating opportunities for similar processes to occur in other areas – organic development from smaller initiatives led mostly by motivated newcomers to larger festivals organized in cooperation with local authorities. In this way, the promising practice will not only bring the benefits that cultural festivals provide, but also improve community integration within the process of establishing the practice itself.

However, it is not always the case that local residents are willing to organize events of that scale and character. Although Oldambt festivals are definitely not of the type of the largest music festivals in Europe, they were still considered as big events in comparison to local resource availability and the vision of what kind of events local inhabitants would like to participate in. While the idea of festivals was very much appreciated by respondents, they were also emphasizing that smaller festivals could work too, and if organized regularly,

possibly in rotating locations within the area, in a healthy work division, could yield more benefits for local communities.

What seems crucial in the case of Oldambt is that there were active, engaged newcomers with a will to create something in their new place of residence and the knowledge of what would be attractive for visitors. Although implicitly, the discussion during workshops revolved around the question of whether there are such persons in the confronted rural area, and how they can be encouraged to undertake similar activities. In other words, there always needs to be a subject who is willing to take on the role of a leader. By definition, the LEADER group is one such subject, but it is also important to harness the energy and knowledge of newcomers on new types of initiatives, who can then be very much supported by the LEADER group. In consequence, attracting newcomers is an important element of this virtuous cycle of “newcomers – new initiatives – more newcomers”, which is indeed a cycle and should be supported from both ends.

As for further steps to be taken in the context, one particular benefit of the workshop was to show that the local LEADER group is very well prepared to support initiatives of local residents. Although the workshop did inspire local action, it will probably take the direction of smaller events revolving around food, with possible developments in the future. This will mostly involve the local LEADER group, as it is a strong actor coordinating many local actions, although the discussion about identifying and encouraging newcomers to share their vision and resources in common work seems to have sown a seed of new approach to the problem. It remains to be seen how this process develops in the future.

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