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Tourism Clusters in Eastern Poland - Analysis of Selected Aspects of the Operation

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Abstract

In this article, basing on the literature studies, the specificity of tourism clusters was explained and the characteristics that can differentiate clusters' structures were identified. The main research purpose of the article was identification and comparative analysis of the functioning of tourism clusters in the macro-region of Eastern Poland. It covered a number of factors. For the purpose of the objective realization, the method of analysis of the secondary sources was used. The results allowed for identifying common features of clusters, differentiation, identification of strengths, weakness of the activities of many clusters as well as threats. They formed the basis for recommendation of courses of action, which will contribute to the further development of the existing clusters and their better use in improving the competitiveness, and the regional development position.

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Keywords: Tourism cluster; Functioning; Features; Eastern Poland.

Introduction

In the scale of Poland, tourism clusters are of an innovative nature. They are a less popular form of cooperation. Increasingly, there is a demand for information about the existing and emerging clusters (Roman, 2013). Also in the world, despite the fact that the practice of creation of clusters is much more advanced, the studies on them rarely appear, as indicated by Erkuş-Öztürk (2009) in one of his articles. According to him, there is a need for more research on clusters in order to confront theory with practice. In the author's opinion, relations of the networks' creation and factors that generate their formation should be studied in detail. The issue of monitoring and evaluation

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of tourism networks was also indicated by March and Wilkinson (2009).

Publications that address the problem of functioning of tourism clusters in Poland usually relate to the individual case studies (Staszewska, 2009; Kaliszczak, 2009; Sikora, 2012). There is a lack of broader research and evaluation of tourism activities' structures, particularly in relation to Eastern Poland. The activity of tourism clusters provides an opportunity for the development of tourism in the macro-region, based on new development initiatives (the development of tourism infrastructure, and diverse, high-quality, innovative and attractive products). Thanks to these initiatives, tourism can contribute to activation of regions of Eastern Poland, which, compared to the rest of the country, are underdeveloped.

The main (research) objective of this article is identification and comparative analysis of the functioning of tourism clusters in the macro-region of Eastern Poland, covering 5 voivodeships - Podlaskie, Warmian-Masurian, Subcarpathian, Lublin, Kielce. For the purpose of the objective realization, the method of analysis of the secondary sources was used. The results of the conducted research allowed for indicating the common as well as differentiating features of the identified clusters, their strengths and weaknesses of functioning, and determining threats. The results of the study constituted the basis for recommendation of activates for the further development of clusters and their better use in improving competitiveness and the development position of the regions. Basing on the literature studies the article explained the specificity of tourism clusters (the difference between a tourism and industrial cluster), and identified the characteristics (factors) that can differentiate cluster structures.

1. Literature review

In the literature a number of definitions of the tourism cluster concept, and the industrial cluster, can be encountered. Some emphasize its components and the basic features, other consistency of purposes of the cluster members and the need for the companies to cooperate during networking. The tourism cluster can be defined, as in the words of Kachniewska, as "*an active network of tourism products manufacturers, supporting their entrepreneurs of other industries, tourism organizations, local authorities and the local governments, business environment institutions, educational and expert facilities (universities, R & D institutions), working together under a particular brand (brand of a tourist product), and at the same time competing with each other in terms of the quality, innovation, and uniqueness of the offered services*". This definition refers to the first cluster definition formulated by Porter (2000). Beni (2003), on the other hand, argues that "*a tourism cluster is a defined group of tourist attractions occurring in the area, delivered by high quality equipment and services, politically and sociologically consistent, where a marriage between the production chain and cultural aspects occurs, organized on the basis of professional management, and as a result, forming a unified and competitive network of organizations with a significant strategic advantage*". Summing up, a tourism cluster is a group of companies and institutions connected through a common product or several truism products. These organizations operate in a given area, and their relations may be of vertical (within the chain of tourism products) or horizontal nature (exchange of information, skills and other factors between the entities involved within the framework of the product) (Siarkiewicz, et al., 2012).

Tourism clusters differ from typical industrial clusters. Industrial clusters are based on manufacturing, and tourism clusters on the service offer, usually in the form of a package (Staszewska, 2009). The basic difference regards the final product of the cluster. In tourism product is comprehensive and consists of many different products that can exist in the market independently (Sikora, 2012). The offer of a tourism cluster is therefore the sum of smaller offers. In the industry, the cluster cooperation constitutes a joint product, parts of which, derived from the cluster members, cannot exist independently on the market as a variant of the overall micro-offer of the cluster. In tourism, a weaker level of identification with the cluster is observed, which may be due to the fact that the tourist offer exhibits a higher level of diversity and greater possibility of actuating the product than it is in the case of the industry. Tourism clusters are also less associated with the R & D sphere. This is due to the specific nature of the service product, in relation to which research focuses mainly on the market sphere. Tourism clusters do not set significant initial barriers (in the form of special skills) for the new members. Usually, the admission is based on a declaration of will and the membership fee (Staszewska, 2009).

Cluster structures can be very diverse, in particular with regard to the economic potential of the participating companies (Hołub-Ivan, 2012). Other factors that may differentiate them, and affect the development level and effectiveness of the cluster are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics differentiating clusters and determining their typology (classification)

Features of the clusters	Description
The degree of self-awareness of the cluster	acting; latent; potential
The duration of operation	"younger clusters" of 1-3 years, "the older clusters" four years and more
The size, number of members (potential power)	dense clusters; rare clusters; large clusters (over 61 entities); medium clusters (29 to 60 entities); small clusters (up to 28 members)
Territorial scope (the focus of the cluster)	the cluster is rooted regionally; depending on the location of interrelated entities forming the cluster, we distinguish the following clusters: local, supralocal, regional and supraregional, national, supranational (cross-border, international)
The structure of the cluster	clusters should bring together the following categories of participants: business entities, supporting entities, educational and research and development institutions, the local authorities;
Form of initiation of the business activity	as part of a grassroots initiative (through the private sector entities); as a part of the top-down initiative (through the units outside the corporate sector); the mixed initiative
Funding of the initiative at an early stage of the cluster development	private financing by the cluster members (membership fees) and with the public funds under clusters' development support programs
Involvement of the coordinator (broker of the cluster)	having a broker or without a broker; the broker is responsible for organizing and facilitating contacts between the cluster members, supports the development by providing access to resources, assistance in contacts with the environment, creates favourable conditions for the entities in the cluster;
Organizational and legal form of activity	agreement consortium, association, foundation, company, cooperative, business organization, the agreement of members (partnership agreement)
Cluster's development phase or cycle of life	nucleus stage; stabilization; maturity; transformation; decline / nucleus; growth; mature; declining
The cluster development model	Italian model; Danish model, Dutch model; American model
The number of horizontally related sectors	narrow and wide (the number of areas of activity in the cluster)
The purpose of functioning	purposes are the result of needs and circumstances; they are usually diverse; the directions and dynamics of cluster development processes depend on the clearly defined objectives and their implementation
The effects of co-operation and the degree of activity	marketing activities, raising the competence of the members or preparation of joint market offers; the level of activity can be measured by the number of completed projects (or the number of joint products)
The ability to create jobs	clusters with growing, stable or declining employment
Competitive position	global, national, average, poor
Measurable benefits from the operation	determine the strength, the position of the cluster, its development abilities with regard to attracting further entities, mainly business (e.g., improving qualifications of the employees, attracting customers, increase in sales, implementation of innovation, cost reduction)
The importance of technology / the innovation capacity	clusters of high, medium, low technologies / highly or lowly innovative clusters

Sources: own study based on (Hołub-Iwan, 2012); (Staszewska, 2009); (Roman i Zawadka, 2010); (Enright, 2001 et. al Brodnicki i Szultka, 2002).

Clusters are usually located around the tourist assets. Their extent determines the degree of concentration of the cluster, and the attractiveness its size measured by the number of entities providing services for the benefit of tourists. The development of tourism clusters is affected by many factors, which characterize the tourist region, such as attractions and tourist infrastructure, tourism traffic, related and supporting sectors. However, the key factor is the cooperation of local authorities, supporting institutions, scientific and research institutions with local small and medium-sized enterprises. (Kusa, 2008) Each member of the cluster is to fulfil certain tasks in the structure.

Although clusters constitute independent structures developing under the objective market relations in the favourable location conditions (Holub-Ivan and Małachowska, 2008; Kaliszczak, 2009), their development is strongly affected by the initiatives popularizing the idea of clustering and the possibility of co-financing the clusters' creation projects with the resources coming from the EU structural funds (Expert..., 2007). The popularity of clustering is also the result of the possibility of generating by the structures of a number of interrelated benefits, both for participants of the clusters and the regions of their functioning. Currently, clusters are perceived as instruments of development and increase of competitiveness of regions, especially of the delayed development, to which the macro-region of Eastern Poland belongs.

2. Method

To answer the problem question: what cluster structures are currently operating in Eastern Poland, and how their functioning is presented, the method of secondary sources analysis was used (Desk research). The main sources of information included the cluster catalogues of various regions developed by the Polish Agency for Enterprise Development (PARP) (Klasy w województwie..., 2011, 2012), websites of the identified cluster structures (or their coordinators), and a scientific publication on one of the clusters (Roman and Zawadka, 2010). When identifying clusters (apart from the cluster catalogues) additionally a cluster map available on the website of PARP and the publication containing a list of clusters (Grzoch, 2012) were used. The study was conducted during December 2014 - February 2015 period.

The conducted study consisted in collection and analysis of information on such areas of functioning of clusters as: the territorial scope of the activity - the focus of the cluster, region, rooting, lifespan, size and structure, method of the initiative launching, the presence of a coordinator, organizational and legal form, main objectives of clusters, the current effects of cooperation, and the cluster financing sources in the initial period of operation. There was made a comparison of the clusters in relation to mentioned areas in order to determine common and differentiating features and to identify strengths and weaknesses of the activities and threats to the further functioning.

3. Results

Based on the conducted studies 16 tourism clusters operating in the Eastern Poland Macro-region were identified: North East Innovation Tourism Cluster "Kryształ Europy", W sercu natury - Cluster of the Eastern Poland Tourism Brands, The Supraśl Health-resort Cluster, Okopski Agrotourism Cluster, Elbląg Tourism Cluster, „Szlak Dziedzictwa Kulturowego” Social Cluster, Local Tourist Organization "Ziemia Mrągowska" and Mazury Tourism Cluster, Tourist Cluster of Western Masuria, Tourist Network of Cooperation "Klaster Suwalszczyzna-Mazury", Carpathian Tourism Cluster, the "Podkarpacie Smaki" Cluster, Cluster of Tourism and Regional Development "Słońce Regionu", Innovative Health and Tourism Cluster "Uzdrowiska – Perły Polski Wschodniej", Quality of Life Cluster "Kraina Podkarpacie", Local Tourist Organization "Kraina Lessowych Wąwozów", Restaurateurs' and Hoteliers' Cluster.

Tourism clusters are present in each of the five regions (as a rooting region). Particularly active in creating linkages are three regions. The greatest number of structures was created in Podlaskie (5 clusters - 31.3%), and the Warmia and Mazury region, as well as Subcarpathian region (4 clusters – each 25%). In the Lublin region there are 2 clusters (12.5%), and in Świętokrzyskie 1 cluster (6.25%).

Many tourism clusters go with their range beyond the primary region of rooting. Three members of the tourism clusters (18.7%) come from two regions of Eastern Poland: Podlasie and Warmia-Mazury. One cluster (6.25%) concentrates entities belonging to the three provinces. The remaining 12 clusters (75%) connect entities from one region in Eastern Poland into a network.

Taking into consideration the affiliation of entities from different regions with several structures, it should be noted that the most active in the clusters are the entities from the Warmia-Mazury region. Since they operate in 7 different structures. In addition, a detailed localisation of the members of cluster structures indicates that the majority of clusters (8 - 50%) from Eastern Poland has a regional coverage. Four clusters (25%) have a supra-regional nature, and 3 (18.7%) supra-local. One cluster (6.25%) has a transnational range.

During the research the life span of clusters was analysed. The analysis shows that the greatest number of clusters

came into being in 2007 (4 clusters - 25%) and 2012 (5 clusters - 31.3%). The oldest cluster was established in 2006, and the youngest in 2013. High activity of clusters' creation falls within the period 2011-2013. 10 clusters were created then - 62.5%. Despite the short length of lifetime of all the structures operating in Eastern Poland, "younger" (7 structures) and "older" (9 clusters) clusters are distinguished.

The most common organizational and legal form of tourism clusters is an association. This form is related to the lack of possibility for conducting gainful activity. 9 clusters (56.2%) function within this form. The remaining 7 (43.7%) operate on the basis of the members' agreement (partnership agreement), which is the most free form of cooperation between entities in the pursuit of a common goal. Taking into consideration the current number of members these include mostly medium-sized (8 clusters - 50%) and large (6 clusters - 37.5%) structures.

In the structure of clusters, among all the entities, enterprises (micro, medium and small) are predominant. The conducted analysis of the collected data shows that economic structure is correct and complete only in 4 clusters (25%). Basic groups that should be represented in the structures operate within their framework: companies, support institutions, entities of the science and R & D sector, and representatives of local authorities. In subsequent four clusters (25%) only the members of the research units are missing, whereas in 5 other (31.3%) - the authorities. Often, these representatives act as external partners with whom cooperation is conducted. The remaining 3 clusters (18.7%) create networks only of enterprises and support institutions.

Initiatives for appointment of cluster structures were various. The largest number of clusters (10 structures - 62.5%) was established as part of a top-down initiative, whereas 8 of them (50%) were initiated by the representatives of non-governmental sector, and 2 (12.5%) - of science sector. Only 4 clusters (25%) were created from the bottom up, on the initiative of business representatives. Within the mixed initiative 2 structures (12.5%) were created.

Each of the tourist clusters has its own network broker (coordinator). In the case of 10 clusters (generated from a top-down initiative), the initiator is also the coordinator of the cluster. These were different entities (Local Action Group, Foundation, Associations, Local tourist organizations, the Chamber of Agriculture and Tourism, University or a Science Park). In the case of 2 clusters created on mixed initiatives the function of the coordinator is executed by the newly created Association. In 4 clusters appointed bottom-up the role of the coordinator is played by another non-governmental organization (association), a newly formed association (in two cases), or a business representative who is a member of the cluster. Due to the fact that in the case of 4 tourism clusters (25%) participation of authorities as well as R & D units is clearly visible, they can be compared to the Dutch cluster model. The remaining 12 (75%) are similar to the clusters in the Danish model.

The creation of a number of tourism clusters was associated with the implementation of projects for which funding was obtained from public funds. In the initial period of operation a total of 8 clusters (50%) benefited from the external funds coming from the EU Structural Funds under several support programs such as: Development of Eastern Poland OP, Human Capital OP, Regional Operational Programme, Operational Programme of the Civic Initiatives Fund, as well as from the means of the Swiss Funds under the Swiss-Polish Cooperation Programme. Six of the cluster structures (37.5%) were created without any external support, while in the case of 2 clusters (12.5%) source materials do not provide information about the support for the establishment of the initiative.

Objectives and areas of operation of tourism clusters are very diverse. Most structures (12 clusters - 75%) set the expansion of the tourist offer on the basis of the available resources through the creation and promotion of new tourism products as the main objective. Most often, the branded, comprehensive, specialized, flexible and innovative products were referred to. Slightly fewer number (10 clusters - 62.5%) intend to promote the region as an attractive tourist destination and popularise the knowledge on its qualities. A large group is also orientated towards joint training projects and knowledge transfer (6 clusters - 37.5%), and an increase of innovation of enterprises in clusters (5 clusters - 31.3%). Other less common goals of clusters are associated with: standardization and improvement of the customer service through the implementation of quality management systems, promotion of the cluster and institutions gathered in clusters, formulation (or participation in construction) of the tourism development strategy, measures to improve the tourism infrastructure of the region, creation of a system of information, promotion and tourist reservation, tourism research, organization of conferences, seminars and scientific forums, implementation of economic missions and study visits, individual development of the members of the cluster, development of entrepreneurship, and the development of international cooperation.

During the study, an attempt was made to determine the translation of the assumed goals into specific results of the previous cooperation. The most common results of joint actions of the clusters are: new joint tourist products (in the case of 11 structures - 68.7%), which confirms the realization of the assumed objective, and the Internet platform of cooperation (launched by 11 clusters - 68.7%). As a joint product, clusters usually undertake to delineate a new route (7 clusters - 43.7%), develop thematic stay packages (5 clusters - 31.3%), and create the product - item (5 structures - 31.3%). Less commonly, joint events are realized or a new object created. To a large extent actions of clusters focus on: trainings and workshops (8 clusters), the issuance of promotional materials – of a region, entities and products of the cluster (cluster 7), participation in fairs, exhibitions, and events promoting the region and its products (7 clusters), organization of economic missions and study trips (6 clusters). Clusters devote less attention during their activity to: the development of the existing products, organization of conferences, seminars, and forums, promotional campaigns in traditional and electronic media, meetings identifying common areas of activity, research in enterprises and municipalities, or the development of strategic documents. Individual clusters have undertaken to develop standards of cooperation between the sphere of science and the sphere of the economy, organization of courses, issuance of materials allowing for implementation of quality systems in enterprises, or organization of events promoting products.

Conclusions

Cluster cooperation in the field of tourism in Eastern Poland is very popular, which is evidenced by constantly emerging new structures. All regions exhibit activity in the creation of this type of relationships. It should be noted a very large impact of non-governmental organizations on the development of clusters.

A common feature of the tourism clusters currently operating in the in the analysed area is the relatively young age. All structures are characterized by having a coordinator, and enterprises are dominant among the members.

The clusters show great diversity when taking into account the territorial scope of the action and the number of members. The clusters were created in different periods, under different initiatives. Their organizational and legal form is an association or partnership agreement. The entities acting as coordinators are very varied. The funds from several support programs were used for the establishment of part of the clusters, as well as to support their activities in the initial period of operation. The clusters have also shown significant differences in the owned structure.

Despite their young age, the clusters are able to use their potential. The carried out analysis of the effects of previously performed activities leads to the conclusion that the clusters offer a chance to produce new tourism products.

Unfortunately, the weakness of many tourism clusters of Eastern Poland is their functioning based on the available forms of public funding. The weaknesses of some of the clusters include the lack of representatives of R & D and science entities in their structure.

A threat to the continued functioning of many tourism clusters may be, in addition to the focus on external financing, the rather forced top-down nature of the appointment of structures, and the lack of local government representatives within the structure.

Recommendations

Public authorities should be involved in the functioning of the existing structures to a greater extent. The presence of local authorities will strengthen their sense of security. Local authorities, as members of the cluster structures have important tasks to perform. Their active participation is essential, however without assuming the responsibility for all actions and results (Solvell et al., 2006). They may be involved, inter alia, in the search for companies and initiating contact between them, in the strengthening and creating platforms for cooperation between enterprises and institutions that generate knowledge, introducing changes in the educational system to prepare for new forms of collaboration, cutting down on bureaucracy when establishing new companies or acquiring public support measures, the organization of training programs related to the idea of clustering, promotion of the region and supporting the promotion of enterprises, the creation of cells for clusters in the administration offices. In case of the absence of initiatives from the private sector the authorities can take over the role of leaders in the new structures. It is also important for the support of the development of clusters to be inscribed in the strategic policy of

the region. This is particularly important because of the external benefits generated by the clusters.

Actions should also be taken to acquire new members for the structures that are not too numerous. Appropriate critical mass is in fact necessary in order to achieve synergy. Particular attention should be paid to attracting the representatives of scientific institutions and research institutes in those clusters, where their participation is low or not present at all. Their participation in the networks and the implementation of tasks related to the research concerning the tourism market and tourism products, searching for innovative solutions implemented by the cluster, and building new models of cooperation within the framework of the cluster are of crucial importance. Local authorities can stimulate both the coordinators, as well as the companies in the cluster to meet the requirement of a specific "critical mass" by awarding additional points to the projects for clusters with a sufficiently large number of members and the appropriate structure of entities (Holub-Ivan, 2012).

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