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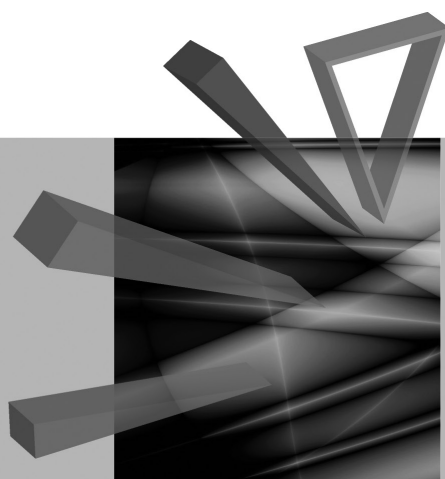
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Contents

Introduction	9
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Part 1. Theoretical aspects of regional economy

Ryszard Broł: Innovation vs. regional development	13
Ewa Glińska, Anna Kononiuk: The concept of regional strategy of smart specialization	27
Hanna Kruk: Resilience, competitiveness and sustainable development of the region – similarities and differences	35
Andrzej Sztando: Regional innovation strategy implementation – system model covering the results of the analysis of the Polish experiences	43
Andrzej Raszkowski: Creativity in the context of regional development – selected issues	52
Yuliya Melnyk: Regional peculiarities of the global art market	62
Elżbieta Załoga, Dariusz Milewski: The impact of transport on regional development	71
Alina Kulczyk-Dynowska: Diversified spatial neighbourhood – a metropolis and a national park	79

Part 2. The results of European regional space research and analyses

Malgorzata Markowska, Danuta Strahl: Polish regions against the background of European regional space with regard to smart growth – aggregate perspective	89
Beata Bal-Domańska: Does smart growth enhance economic cohesion? An analysis for the EU regions of new and old accession countries	100
Elżbieta Sobczak: Typology of European regions vs. effects of workforce changes by the level of research and development activities intensity ...	111
Malgorzata Karczewska: Gross domestic expenditures on research and development in GDP of European Union countries – changes in trends	121
Marzena Grzesiak, Anita Richert-Kaźmierska: Educational engagement of the elderly – the experiences of selected Baltic Sea Region countries	133
Ewa Coll: The classification of EU and Eastern Partnership countries regarding economic development level – a dynamic approach	144
Anetta Waśniewska: The potential of the population in the Baltic Sea Region in the years 2001–2011	157
Alla Melnyk: Modernization of regional structural policy mechanisms in Ukraine in the process of its EU integration	169

Part 3. Selected problems of Polish regions functioning and development

Dariusz Głuszczyk: Barriers to innovation activities in industrial enterprises by Polish regions in 2004–2006 and 2008–2010	181
Piotr Hajduga: Special economic zones as stimuli to regional development during a crisis	191
Adam Przybyłowski: Sustainable transport development prerequisites in selected Polish regions	199
Mariusz E. Sokołowicz: The impact of transnational corporations' activity on regional human capital. Case study of the Łódź metropolitan area ...	210
Anna Jasińska-Biliczak: Interregional cooperation as the stimulation of proinnovation actions – the casual analysis	222
Franciszek Adameczuk: Cross-border cooperation of Lower Silesia and Saxony – current results and prospects	230
Agnieszka Barczak: Managing the production process of a group of agricultural farms of the Pomorze and Mazury Region and their economic development	240
Tomasz Dorożyński, Wojciech Urbaniak: Experiences of county employment agencies in the use of EU structural funds to promote employment. The case of the Łódź voivodeship	249
Małgorzata Golińska-Pieszynska: Contemporary innovative practices in a regional context of the Łódź region	260

Streszczenia

Część 1. Teoretyczne aspekty gospodarki regionalnej

Ryszard Broł: Innowacyjność a rozwój regionalny	26
Ewa Glińska, Anna Koniuk: Koncepcja regionalnej strategii inteligentnej specjalizacji	34
Hanna Kruk: Rezyliencja, konkurencyjność i rozwój zrównoważony regionów – podobieństwa i różnice	42
Andrzej Sztando: Wdrażanie regionalnej strategii innowacji – model systemu stanowiący rezultat analizy polskich doświadczeń	51
Andrzej Raszkowski: Kreatywność w kontekście rozwoju regionalnego – wybrane zagadnienia	61
Yuliya Melnyk: Regionalna specyfika globalnego rynku sztuki	70
Elżbieta Załoga, Dariusz Milewski: Wpływ transport na rozwój regionalny	78
Alina Kulczyk-Dynowska: Zróżnicowane sąsiedztwo w przestrzeni – metropolie i park narodowy	86

Część 2. Rezultaty badań i analiz nad europejską przestrzenią regionalną

Małgorzata Markowska, Danuta Strahl: Polskie regiony na tle europejskiej przestrzeni regionalnej w kontekście inteligentnego rozwoju – ujęcie agregatowe	99
Beata Bal-Domańska: Czy inteligentny rozwój sprzyja spójności ekonomicznej? Analiza dla regionów państw Unii Europejskiej nowego i starego rozszerzenia	110
Elżbieta Sobczak: Typologia regionów europejskich a efekty zmian liczby pracujących według poziomu intensywności prac badawczo-rozwojowych	120
Małgorzata Karczewska: Udział nakładów na badania i rozwój w PKB krajów Unii Europejskiej – tendencje zmian	132
Marzena Grzesiak, Anita Richert-Kaźmierska: Zaangażowanie osób starszych w edukację – doświadczenia wybranych państw regionu Morza Bałtyckiego	143
Ewa Coll: Klasyfikacja państw UE i krajów Partnerstwa Wschodniego ze względu na poziom rozwoju gospodarczego – ujęcie dynamiczne	156
Anetta Waśniewska: Potencjał ludności regionu Morza Bałtyckiego w latach 2001-2011	168
Alla Melnyk: Modernizacja mechanizmów regionalnej polityki strukturalnej Ukrainy w procesie integracji z Unią Europejską	177

Część 3. Wybrane problem funkcjonowania i rozwoju polskich regionów

Dariusz Głuszczuk: Przeszkody działalności innowacyjnej przedsiębiorstw przemysłowych według regionów Polski w latach 2004–2006 i 2008–2010 .	189
Piotr Hajduga: Specjalne Strefy Ekonomiczne jako stymulator rozwoju regionalnego w dobie kryzysu	198
Adam Przybyłowski: Przesłanki zrównoważonego rozwoju transportu w wybranych polskich regionach	209
Mariusz E. Sokolowicz: Wpływ korporacji transnarodowych na rozwój kapitału ludzkiego w regionie. Przykład łódzkiego obszaru metropolitalnego	221
Anna Jasińska-Biliczak: Współpraca międzyregionalna stymulantem działań proinnowacyjnych – przykład województwa opolskiego	229
Franciszek Adamczuk: Współpraca transgraniczna Dolnego Śląska i Saksonii – aktualne wyniki i perspektywy	239
Agnieszka Barczak: Zarządzanie procesem produkcji grupy gospodarstw rolnych regionu Pomorze i Mazury z uwzględnieniem poziomu rozwoju gospodarczego	248

Tomasz Dorożyński, Wojciech Urbaniak: Doświadczenia powiatowych urzędów pracy w zakresie wykorzystywania funduszy strukturalnych UE w celu promocji zatrudnienia. Przykład województwa łódzkiego	259
Małgorzata Golińska-Pieszyńska: Współczesne praktyki innowacyjne w kontekście regionalnym w oparciu o region łódzki	267

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**EXPERIENCES
OF COUNTY EMPLOYMENT AGENCIES
IN THE USE OF EU STRUCTURAL FUNDS
TO PROMOTE EMPLOYMENT.
THE CASE OF THE ŁÓDŹ VOIVODESHIP**

Summary: EU funds are, among other means, deployed to promote employment and prevent unemployment. The ESF plays a special role here as the main source of funding for projects that support the labour market. Aid is addressed mainly to natural persons disadvantaged on the labour market and those at risk of social exclusion. The paper focuses on the evaluation of the operations of labour market institutions in respect of the use of EU structural funds. The premise for such an approach was the difference in opinions about the efficiency and efficacy of the use of EU resources on the labour market. Hence, the main objective of the paper is to assess the operations of county employment agencies in the Łódź voivodeship in the field of employment promotion and counteracting unemployment in the context of the systemic projects co-financed with the ESF.

Keywords: EU structural funds, county employment agencies, Łódź voivodeship.

1. Introduction

One of the aims of EU structural funds is to promote employment and prevent unemployment. The European Social Fund (ESF) plays a special role here as the main funding source for projects supporting the labour market. The aid is addressed mainly to natural persons disadvantaged on the labour market and at risk of social exclusion.

The beneficiaries of ESF in Poland are mainly state-financed units, non-public entities, non-governmental organizations and entrepreneurs. Still, the main role in shaping the regional and local employment policy is that of the public employment services.

In our paper, we have focused on the description and functional assessment of labour market institutions regarding the use of EU structural funds. The reason for taking up this issue were varied opinions on the efficiency of the use of EU funds on the labour market, in particular under the so called systemic projects run by county employment agencies (Powiatowe Urzędy Pracy; henceforth PUPs).

Therefore, the main aim of the paper is to evaluate the opinions of PUPs with respect to their operations designed to promote employment and prevent unemployment in the context of systemic projects co-funded by the ESF under the Human Capital Operational Programme (HCOP).

2. Impact of structural funds on the domestic labour market

In 2004–2010 the impact of EU funds on the Polish economy was relatively insignificant. The situation improved considerably in 2009–2010, mainly owing to the accumulation of payments under the National Development Plan and the gradual implementation of new programmes. According to forecasts, the biggest impact of EU funds on economic growth is expected in 2013–2015.

According to the MaMoR3 and HERMIN models, in 2010 the absorption of EU funds increased the employment rate in the 15–64 age group by 0.7–1.2 pp, increased the total number of the employed by 188,000–315,000 and reduced the unemployment rate by 1.1–1.8 pp in relation to the scenario without the EU funds. Much higher indices are expected in 2013–2015. Employment should increase by 1.6–1.7 pp and unemployment should decrease by 2.4–2.7 pp. It is estimated that the number of the employed may even be higher by 450,000 compared to the no EU funds scenario.

The forecasts, based on the EuImpactModIII model, are even more optimistic. They predict that the positive impact of EU funds on the labour market will peak in 2013, when the employment rate will be higher by 5.2 pp, unemployment lower by 3.5 pp and the total number of the employed higher by 1,356,000.

The dynamics of EU funds spending seems to validate the predictions of the third model, according to which the accumulation of the positive effects of EU funds disbursement is more likely in 2013 than in successive years. Nevertheless, the scale of the impact seems to be rather optimistic, especially in the light of the current economic problems. Besides, according to numerous microeconomic evaluation studies, the effects of EU projects in promoting employment and curbing unemployment are less significant than expected [*Wpływ polityki spójności...* 2011].

3. The impact of PUP systemic projects on the labour market as shown in evaluation studies

To start with, it needs to be stressed that the general very negative assessment of the efficiency of the PUP systemic projects seems unjustified. This is evidenced by the percentage of the unemployed and jobseekers who took up employment within 6 months after they completed their participation in the project. In 2010 the share was 47% for the systemic measure 6.1.3 HCOP and was higher than for the whole of Priority VI (45%). It is worth adding that 54% of those who took part in the PUP systemic projects in 2009 still worked or ran their own businesses in 2010, yet only 41% of them believe that they owe their employment to their participation in the project.

However, not all the unemployed are the beneficiaries of systemic projects. Extra support in 2009–2010 was granted to nearly 315,000 people, i.e. 7.08% of the unemployed in 2009 and 9.26% in 2010. In the Łódź voivodeship the percentages were 8.97% and 10.13% respectively.¹ However, systemic projects generally do not differ much from the “normal” PUP operations in activating the unemployed. The support is limited to the instruments listed in the Act on Employment Promotion and Labour Market Institutions. The only fundamental difference introduced by systemic projects is the larger scale of the activation thanks to more resources available in counties.

Thus, employment agencies are extremely restricted in implementing systemic projects, compared to the beneficiaries selected in competitive calls for proposals, who can flexibly choose the forms and methods of the support and shape the management of projects. In practice, systemic projects boil down to fulfilling statutory tasks only in a slightly different formula and with extra formal duties resulting from the specificity of EU projects, e.g. payment applications, reporting, information and promotion, eligibility.

The agencies (like any other legal business entity) may, of course, implement projects selected on general terms in calls for proposals. Some do that voluntarily, with varying degrees of success, simply seeking extra funds from county authorities and the management of the agency.

Projects co-funded by ESF differ from other PUP activities in that they address the aid to target groups, mostly to persons disadvantaged on the labour market [Act on Employment Promotion... 2009, art. 49]. Today these are mainly people under 25, often with higher education. An issue in this case is how to select the right people for a project. Employment agencies, seeking to achieve specific result indicators, usually select clients with the best chances to take up employment within a short period. Those in a really difficult situation are offered basic aid from

¹ Some of these persons may appear in the statistics twice as they participate in a systemic project again.

the Labour Fund. Besides, systemic projects deliver only the so-called active labour market measures, meaning e.g. they may not offer unemployment benefits. All the above may lead to the efficiency of intervention under systemic projects that is statistically higher than the average for the overall activities of county employment services.

Efficiency assessment must take into account the management of systemic projects, and two issues are relevant here. Firstly, PUPs' personnel is in general well-qualified, experienced and familiar with the way in which public employment agencies operate and how EU projects should be prepared and implemented. That follows from the standards used in public employment services and from the fact that they were the first to operate similar projects under the Operational Programme Human Resources Development since 2004. On the other hand, because of the restrictions resulting from the systemic project funding rules, extra duties are usually not paid for and the bulk of project management costs are borne by the local government. Therefore, the employees operating the projects are worse off than those involved in commercial projects (lower pay, worse workplace conditions, smaller teams, worse equipment) with similar responsibilities. The result is high staff turnover and migration of employees to the private sector.

The list of impediments faced by the beneficiaries of systemic projects is long. Their elimination may help to improve the efficiency of the projects. The biggest problems stem from project guidelines and procedures and not from the law or the specificity of the labour market. Therefore, to change them would not involve undue costs or difficulties. Some guidelines would only need clarifying and simplifying or even lifting. Experts agree that the present situation is not conducive to achieving notable effects. What is visible is the primacy of procedures and control over the essence of the projects. The main aim, which is pursued unconditionally, is to spend 100% of the allocation.

The effects of systemic projects depend not only on the organizers but also on the participants. In 2007–2011, over 538,000 people took advantage of PUP systemic projects and 472,000 completed them according to plan. The majority of the participants were under 25 (44%). The average participant's education was considerably higher than the average for the total of the unemployed in Poland. In cities, 17% of the participants had tertiary education qualifications, compared to 13% in the country. Among all the unemployed, the ratio is only 10%. At the same time, people with few or no qualifications rarely take part in projects. As already mentioned, this may stem from the anxiety about the so-called "difficult customer" and potential discipline problems (attendance, examinations, completing successive stages of the project, duration of effects). It is worth noticing that the share of long-term unemployed in the projects is too small in relation to the total of the unemployed in Poland (about 50%).

Another significant problem is the availability of systemic projects to potential candidates. There are two basic barriers here. Firstly, the prevailing group (57%)

are city dwellers. It is necessary, therefore, to facilitate participation to rural residents, e.g. through adequate information, promotion and transport facilitation. Secondly, there remains the problem of the unemployed taking permanent care of dependants (children, elderly persons). This would require the allocation of extra financial support during the project. Also, it seems necessary to subsidize this aid directly after starting a job, e.g. during the next 6 months.

Flaws in systemic projects are sometimes the fault of the participants. At present, the biggest problem is the turnover in the target group. In 2007–2011 the dropout rate was 7%. For the most part, the people who quit are young and with low qualifications, very often the dropouts are trainees who take up odd jobs or seasonal jobs.

4. Results of direct study for the Łódź voivodeship

Below we present the results of a direct study of PUPs' EU projects. The general population included 23 PUPs in the Łódź voivodeship. The study was conducted on the whole community and covered all the agencies. The respondents were EU programme specialists. A questionnaire was used that consisted of 23 questions (classifying q., behaviour q., attitude q.) The study was partly structured.

4.1. Benefits from operating EU projects

The evaluation of the projects was based on the analysis of the system of project delivery. In an open-ended question, PUPs agreed that the main benefit was the extension of the scope of activities addressed to the unemployed ("Through projects the agency can better promote employment, develop human resources and activate unemployed persons").

Thanks to EU funds, various forms of employment support have become more available and the number of beneficiaries has grown. Thanks to the relatively high quality of services to the unemployed, their position on the labour market has improved and their chances of finding employment have grown ("Unemployed people acquire practical skills [...] They improve their vocational qualifications. [...] Entrepreneurship is promoted. [...] Support from a vocational counsellor confirms the sense of applicants' actions"). The image of the agencies as institutions supporting the unemployed has improved. So has people's awareness that training courses and workshops are useful.

The PUPs assess the impact of EU projects on the labour market as moderately positive. They realize that the rate of unemployment is determined mostly by economic activity, and with the present slowdown the number of the unemployed has grown, despite the implementation of EU programmes. It is believed that in order to fight unemployment more efficiently, more funds are needed.

Table 1. Impact of EU funds on the labour market in the Łódź voivodeship as perceived by PUPs

Evaluation criteria	Evaluation							average
	very good (5)	good (4)	neither good nor bad (3)	bad (2)	very bad (1)	no answer (hard to tell)	total	
	number of answers							
Employment rate	3	19				1	23	4.14
Unemployment rate	2	15	5			1	23	3.86
Workers' qualifications	3	19				1	23	4.14
Structure of employment		19	3			1	23	3.86
Migrations		4	10		1	8	23	3.13
Average wage		5	13	1	2	2	23	3.00

Source: own elaboration.

Most of the PUPs believe that the participation in EU educational and training projects improves the qualifications of the unemployed and increases their chances of finding a job. Regarding the usefulness of particular forms of aid, the opinions varied. Vocational training and traineeships were found the most useful. The PUPs also admitted that these forms were the most popular with the jobseekers. E-learning has been found the least useful, maybe because it is still a relatively new and uncommon form, its efficiency and usefulness has not been thoroughly reviewed yet.

Table 2. Impact of educational and training schemes on the qualifications of the unemployed as perceived by PUPs

Evaluation criteria	Evaluation							average
	very good (5)	good (4)	neither good nor bad (3)	bad (2)	very bad (1)	no answer (hard to tell)	total	
	number of answers							
Job trainings/workshops	8	13				2	23	4.38
Language courses	5	12	1	1		4	23	4.11
Post-graduate studies	6	9	6			2	23	4.00
Higher education studies	5	9	6			3	23	3.95
Traineeships	12	9				2	23	4.57
E-learning	2	5	5	2		9	23	3.50

Source: own elaboration.

EU competitive bidding programmes were oriented at the agencies' own staff. Half the respondents believe that the job training and higher education studies improve the qualifications and the professionalism of the staff in their activities addressed to the unemployed and by that improve the quality of their services. New

Table 3. Benefits to PUPs resulting from EU projects

Category	Percentage of answers (23 = 100)*	Number of answers
Increasing the number of beneficiaries	100	23
Staff gaining experience and improving skills	56.52	13
Possibility of employing extra staff, including counsellors and employment agents	21.74	5

* Open-ended question with no limit to the number of answers.

Source: own elaboration.

workers (vocational counsellors, employment agents) employed to operate new projects improve and speed up the serving of jobseekers. High marks were also given to the possibility of rewarding the regular staff involved in projects (though this only applies to projects awarded in tenders) and upgrading the workplace environment. EU funds were relatively seldom used to survey the county labour market for information about desirable forms of action and target groups.

4.2. Obstacles in project implementation

The study was an attempt to indicate and systematize the factors which impede the participation of PUPs in EU projects. To this purpose, a number of open-ended questions were asked. First, obstacles were described which were present throughout the whole project, next, those encountered in successive stages.

The agencies were very critical about the frequent changes of document templates, application generating tools, regulations and their interpretations. Because of the volatility in this field they cannot rely on the already acquired knowledge and have to constantly learn new regulations and guidelines. More time is consumed by reporting, payment applications or applications for projects similar to the already completed ones. The respondents were particularly critical about any changes in rules introduced during project implementation, e.g. regarding age categories and eligibility of costs. Ambiguous rules and the long waiting time for official interpretations, especially when it comes to new regulations, were found to be serious barriers by some agencies.

Also, some agencies have voiced criticism about having to go through numerous formalities, often unnecessary in their opinion, and about extensive reporting requirements. Others, however, did not find that a big problem. Many reservations were made about the large number of quantity indicators and their standardization (“Results and indicators are very strict; one tends to think about figures instead of people; sometimes a project seems to be geared to achieving required indicators and these do not necessarily fit the situation in the county”). Binding norms are often not only unrealistic but also difficult to attain (“For example, for a traineeship it is recommended that 40% of the trainees should be

employed by the institution and that is beyond the competence of the employment agency”). The PUPs generally believe that the system is geared towards complying with norms and not towards the efficient use of resources.

The lack of extra remuneration for systemic project operators has been found to be unjust. More duties are imposed without any form of bonus, giving no incentive for better work. The PUPs assess project funds to be insufficient. The demand for their services is so high that the projects, including statutory activities, can satisfy it only in part.

Table 4. Obstacles in the overall implementation of EU projects in the Łódź voivodeship experienced by PUPs

Category	Percentage of answers (23 = 100)*	Number of answers
Frequent change of regulations and documents:	47.83	11
change of guidelines and regulations during a project	26.09	6
change of document templates	21.74	5
Requirement of extensive reports; generating numerous documents	34.78	8
Different interpretations of regulations	13.04	3
Too long time of waiting for official interpretations	–	–
Strict quantitative norms (indicators)	26.09	6
Limited project funding	52.17	12
No extra remuneration for project operators	13.04	3
Own contribution required	13.04	3

* Open-ended question with no limit to the number of answers.

Source: own elaboration.

There are four stages in project management: preparation, implementation, financial settlement, control. In the preparation stage there are problems with the application generating tool. This results from the insufficient number of characters allowed in descriptions, which makes it impossible to elaborate on issues (a requirement, incidentally). There have been many reservations about the last-minute calls for applications for systemic projects and the long processing procedure. As a result, the time for spending the funds was short.

Table 5. Obstacles in project preparation stage

Category	Percentage of answers (23 = 100)*	Number of answers
Difficulty in handling application generating tool	26.09	6
Long period of project assessment	39.13	9
No obstacles	26.09	6

* Open-ended question with no limit to the number of answers.

Source: own elaboration.

In the implementation stage, significant difficulty is caused by the targeted unemployed persons. Some agencies signalled problems with recruitment. The common problem for most PUPs is trainees dropping out of the project. This causes enormous difficulty because in order to achieve desired quantitative results and indicators, a new recruitment has to be announced and new participants have to be found. They join a project when it is already under way, which weakens the effects (“The biggest barrier is that some participants sometimes drop out [...] This is very troublesome because we need to find a replacement quickly”). Those who leave, usually do not explain their decision. For some agencies a big obstacle is the long waiting for funds, which puts their financial liquidity at risk.

Table 6. Obstacles in the project implementation stage

Category	Percentage of answers (23 = 100)*	Number of answers
Dropping out of the project	65.22	15
Late transfers of tranches	34.78	8

* Open-ended question with no limit to the number of answers.

Source: own elaboration.

Table 7. Obstacles in the financial settlement stage

Category	Percentage of answers (23 = 100)*	Number of answers
Long settlement process	13.04	3
No problems	56.52	13

* Open-ended question with no limit to the number of answers.

Source: own elaboration.

There have been no major reservations regarding the quality of controls which pointed only at minor technical slips.

Table 8. Irregularities found during control activities

Category	Percentage of answers (23 = 100)*	Number of answers
Minor formal errors	30.43	7
erroneous description in document/ column	21.74	5
Faulty coding / marking	21.74	5
unattractive logo (in controller’s opinion)	13.04	3
No irregularities	39.13	9

* Open-ended question with no limit to the number of answers.

Source: own elaboration.

The settlement of a project is not a problem for most PUPs. In some opinions, it is “quite easy”. Such a positive evaluation probably results from accumulated experience and is enhanced by good collaboration with the provincial employment agency. Occasionally, there have been problems with completing a project due to a long settlement process.

5. Conclusions

The assessment of systemic projects run by PUPs and of their impact on the domestic labour market is generally positive. The above quoted findings justify the conclusion that EU funds have helped ameliorate the situation on the labour market, mainly by increasing employment, reducing unemployment and activating disadvantaged or vulnerable social groups, particularly the disabled, those at risk of social exclusion and the unemployed under 25. However, the range of support is limited and does not meet all the needs.

The HCOP has streamlined the operations of public employment services. It has made possible the raising of standards of assistance to the unemployed, the implementation of new methods and instruments of vocational and social activation of the unemployed, the strengthening of collaboration with external stakeholders, including employers. It has also made possible the financing of studies and market analyses, although PUPs conduct these relatively seldom.

In addition, the HCOP finances operations targeted at public employment agencies and their staff. This helps them upgrade their qualifications e.g. through the system of on-the-job training and post-graduate studies. By joining international projects, they can learn high standards from others, both in Poland and abroad. Also, there has been considerable improvement in working conditions, including remuneration (although mainly for those who run projects selected in competitive bids) and workplace environment. The career path has been outlined clearly, which helps limit staff turnover and retain experienced employees in the local administration.

Lastly, an important benefit highlighted by the PUPs is the improvement of their image as institutions supporting the unemployed. The public has become more aware of the usefulness of agencies' activities.

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DOŚWIADCZENIA POWIATOWYCH URZĘDÓW PRACY W ZAKRESIE WYKORZYSTYWANIA FUNDUSZY STRUKTURALNYCH UE W CELU PROMOCJI ZATRUDNIENIA. PRZYKŁAD WOJEWÓDZTWA ŁÓDZKIEGO

Streszczenie: Fundusze strukturalne UE mają m.in. promować zatrudnienie i przeciwdziałać bezrobociu. Szczególna rola przypada Europejskiemu Funduszowi Społecznemu. Adresatami pomocy są przede wszystkim osoby fizyczne defaworyzowane na rynku pracy oraz zagrożone wykluczeniem społecznym. W artykule skoncentrowano się na charakterystyce i ocenie funkcjonowania instytucji rynku pracy w świetle wykorzystania funduszy strukturalnych UE. Przesłanką do podjęcia tej problematyki były niejednoznaczne opinie co do skuteczności i efektywności wykorzystania środków unijnych, w szczególności w ramach projektów systemowych powiatowych urzędów pracy. Dlatego głównym celem artykułu jest ocena działalności urzędów pracy w regionie łódzkim w zakresie promocji zatrudnienia i przeciwdziałania bezrobociu w świetle projektów systemowych współfinansowanych z EFS.

Słowa kluczowe: fundusze strukturalne UE, powiatowe urzędy pracy, region łódzki.