

Lucyna Grabowska, MSc
Poznań University of Economics and Business

<https://doi.org/10.26366/PTE.ZG.2017.105>

The strategy of the social and economic development of Chodzież county as the instrument of creating positive image

Abstract

The aim of the article is to present the strategy of Chodzież county and its influence on the county's development, as well as to attempt to assess the effectiveness of this instrument in creating a positive image. The main aim of the strategy, which is very general and perspective-based, is the local authorities' eagerness to achieve the county's development position which can be socially accepted. In the article, a survey is presented, which was carried out among the county's citizens and involves the most vital thematic areas to which the strategic goals should apply. There is also a description of the strategic goals and their influence on the county's image. The strategy is a projection of the future which was declared with vision and clear goals. The local authorities will endeavor to fulfill the goals together with other issues by taking certain actions previously appointed in the mission and realization scenario of the strategy, as well as by transforming the county's present condition into one which is sought after. There will also be an attempt to assess the strategy as an instrument of creating a positive image of the county.

Keywords: strategy, image.

JEL CODE: A11, A14.

Strategia rozwoju powiatu chodzieskiego jako instrument kreacji wizerunku

Abstrakt

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie strategii rozwojowej powiatu chodzieskiego i jej wpływu na wizerunek powiatu, a także próba oceny skuteczności tego instrumentu w kreacji wizerunku. Celem głównym Strategii, a zarazem najbardziej ogólnym i perspektywicznym jest dążenie samorządu do osiągnięcia odpowiedniego stanu powiatu zdefiniowanego w społecznie wykreowanej wizji jego rozwoju. W artykule zostały przedstawione badania przeprowadzone wśród mieszkańców powiatu chodzieskiego dotyczące najważniejszych społecznie obszarów tematycznych, do których cele strategiczne powinny się odnosić. Opisane cele strategiczne, a także ich wpływ na przyszły wizerunek powiatu. Strategia jest projekcją przyszłości zadeklarowanej w wizji i w wywodzących się z niej celach, do

urzeczywistniania, których samorząd powiatowy, w partnerstwie z innymi podmiotami będzie dążył, podejmując określone sposoby działania wyznaczone w misji i scenariuszu realizacyjnym Strategii oraz dokonując przekształceń obecnego stanu powiatu w oczekiwany. Podjęta zostanie próba oceny strategii jako instrumentu kreacji wizerunku powiatu.

Słowa klucze: strategia, wizerunek.

Introduction

Poviats (counties) today are considered a product to be developed so as to become a place worthy of investments and whose landscape assets are made available to tourists. The image of a *poviat* emphasizes the identity and uniqueness of the region, and as such, it is very important for its development. By choosing an appropriate strategy for socio-economic development, *poviats* create an image that helps them expose all of their resources and unique features, as well as attract investment opportunities, coupled with a wish to create new conditions for the social and economic development of the region. Creating a positive image is becoming an important task of local authorities today, as it allows to attract more investors. Therefore, research conducted among local residents shows the most important areas to which strategic goals should refer.

The general concept of strategy and the essence of development strategy

The concept of strategy derives from the Greek word *strategom*, which means the leader, the one in charge. This concept used to be applied in the art of war, namely in the skillful planning of battles. According to the Prussian general and military theorist K. Von Clausewitz, „strategy is a set of actions leading to the fulfillment of the plan of war, including plans for individual campaigns” (Wysocka, Koziński 2000, p. 5).

As Krzysztof Obłój observes, „strategy has a fundamental impact on life or death, on the success or failure of a company. Similarly to Greek strategists who faced threats posed by foreign armies, today's managers must occasionally face three fundamental strategic questions to understand whether and how the company offers its recipients the satisfaction of their needs. These are the questions about the meaning of the company's existence today and its vision of how to operate in the future, about markets and products, and about the dominant model of operation” (Obłój, 2001, p. 13). The strategy of development in the situation of occurring changes means the way of setting goals, methods and directions of action. The task of the strategy is to provide the basis for rational action.

The main features of a strategy are:

- basing development on durable values and stable elements of the material environment,
- subordination of current activities to long-term strategic goals,
- a holistic approach to development issues through systemic approaches,
- active participation of the authorities and local community in the entire process of formulating and implementing the strategy (Wysocka, Koziński 2000, p. 10).

In explaining the concept of development strategy, one cannot omit strategic planning, which is a way of reasoning, whose subsequent stages are:

1. Evaluating the existing state of affairs and its interpretation
2. Identifying development mechanisms
3. Determining possible solutions
4. Indicating the directions of action to achieve the assumed outcomes
5. Taking advantage of opportunities and overcoming threats thanks to appropriate methods of proceeding.

When developing a strategy of action and development, the current situation should be considered as a point of departure. It is not about where one would like to end up, but about the point where the *gmina* or *powiat* is right now. The strategy is, then, an attempt to determine how far the subject can get in the future. It is also an assessment of the real opportunities and threats that will either facilitate or hinder reaching the assumed objective. It is a difficult art of making decisions, the result of which – alongside other implications – is always a way of perceiving, and hence the image of the subject.

The subject of the strategy is a broadly understood society functioning through its representative bodies and public administration, both local and domestic government. *Powiat* government bodies support citizens at secondary level of administration, and their competences include: education, social assistance and health care, including support for disabled persons, transportation and road infrastructure, tourism, agriculture, forestry, water management, public order and safety, promotion of the region, and many other tasks. Local governments at *powiat* level must also coordinate the activities of *gminas* and conduct investment activities on their own.

The subject of the strategy is the material human environment, which consists of inanimate and animate nature as well as all forms of investment that are the product of human activity, alongside humans perceived through the prism of their needs. Consequently, the subject of the strategy is defined by four elements:

- concentration of activities in central areas,
- strength of impacts on the environment,
- integration with the region formed in the historical process,
- a degree of openness to international contacts (Domański 1995, p. 68).

Poviats marked by a high industrial rate will develop at a faster pace than backward *poviats*. The development strategy of these *poviats* will therefore be entirely different, and also the funds allocated for a given strategy will be larger. The country is the primary subject of the strategy, and the most important one as well. When determining the location of the country as the subject of the strategy, it should be emphasized, above all, that it is an EU country. Poland's area and population place it among one of the largest in Europe, while the geographical location and climate show that Poland is an attractive tourist destination at any time of the year: mountains in winter and sea in summer attract many domestic and foreign tourists all year round. Also the level of development and modernization of enterprises introduced by EU standards, coupled with the country's situation between Germany and Belarus, reveal Poland to be a developing country.

The subject of the strategy are also *poviats* (counties), of which there are 314 in Poland, alongside 66 cities or towns with *poviat* rights, 2478 *gminas* (communes), including 303 urban, 616 mixed and 1559 rural (www.stat.gov.pl). The population and size of *poviats* in Poland determines whether the *poviat* has the capacity to perform tasks in the area of higher-level services. The larger the *poviat*, the larger its population, and thus the greater the ability to fulfill the abovementioned tasks. However, in *gminas*, the situation is a little more complicated, because „trends” are determined by larger *poviat* cities or towns, and the surrounding *gminas* simply cannot compete, creating a huge gap between the two, which necessitates for each subject of the strategy to be considered individually.

In the development of a strategy, four elements are most often identified as the most important in conceptual terms. These are:

1. A vision, which is the image of the future that a local government attempts to create. This vision may differ from the vision created by residents, who can see the future of socio-economic development in a completely different way. The point of departure is to capture the essence of the development of a city/town, *poviat* or *gmina*, which should also take into account geographical factors, structural diversity, civilizational challenges, dynamics of transformations, and anticipated outcomes.

2. A mission, which is the formulation of the vision for the purpose of the strategy, a simple translation showing the goals of the local government's activity and the way to achieve those goals, keeping in mind the available resources. A mission should clearly define the direction of action undertaken by local governments and the source of their competitive advantage. A good mission should be concise and rich in content, simultaneously general and specific, stimulating and realistic. In either case, the process of its implementation must be credible.
3. Goals and tasks are very important in implementing the strategy. There must be several goals, although one main goal and a few auxiliary goals should be set. These objectives should correspond to the areas of interest of local governments and the needs of the local community. They should combine the aspirations and specific actions of all participants of the social and economic life located in a given administration unit. The goals can be divided into principal and operational, and they should assume reducing risks and increasing opportunities.
4. Plans of actions show the directions and instruments of action that are necessary to make a strategy come true. These plans are followed by the choice of a strategy option followed by its implementation and management (Oblój, 2001, p. 48).

To develop a strategy at all levels of management, account should be taken of the consequences of civilizational transformations in each of the areas. In the social area, it is necessary to be aware of the structure of the population, their age, number, changes in the age structure, employment and the related phenomena, including unemployment, poverty and culture. Each factor, if accurately described and analyzed, will help in the preparation of an appropriate strategy which takes into account the current issues of a given area. In the economic area, meanwhile, attention of the local strategy is mainly focused on local enterprises, their development and promotion which will boost their growth and therefore create new jobs. Importantly, these area must not be considered in isolation, given that they are interrelated and interdependent. Thus, a holistic approach should be assumed in developing a strategy. In the economic area, the *poviat* should promote the growth of small and medium-sized enterprises, since they are the ones that are the most exposed to the competition from large companies. The correlation of the social and economic areas can also be shown using the example of launching companies that either raise or upgrade the qualifications of the unemployed across all age groups, therefore creating various forms of cooperation between science and production. The ecological area, through the creation of new

protected forms, purification of water, air, and the manufacturing of healthy food, contributes to the development of local tourism and new forms of recreation. Consequently, this area generates economic value, and as such, it is correlated with the economic area. Its significance and the amount of funds allocated for safeguard measures increase so that the air remains clean and the attractiveness of the region keeps improving. The existing state is marked by deterioration caused by human activity and relevant remedies should be included in the strategy, i.e. what should be done to make the environment and areas such as parks, national parks, nature monuments, landscape parks, wellness areas better, or to protect the existing state and prevent further human devastation of the environment. In developing this type of strategy, it is necessary to evaluate the natural environment: site construction, vegetation, weather conditions, and the hydrosphere.

In the last economic area, problems arise for industry, agriculture and tourism alike. In agriculture, the problem is the constantly declining rate of employment, which interferes with the desire to retain people in the countryside, and in particular young people who migrate to cities in large numbers, therefore increasing urban population, and thus, the unemployment rate and migration balance. When assessing the state of existing agriculture, one should take into account: production space, soil quality, climate, water conditions, as well as manpower resources and education level. On the other hand, as far as industry is concerned, in addition to supporting small and medium-sized local enterprises, an important role is also played by institutions supporting the development of these companies. These include banks that provide financial support in the form of loans, financial, consulting and training institutions, development centers, as well as promotional agencies. When evaluating the economic area, account should be taken of the efficiency of the workplace and the susceptibility to restructuring and modernization as well as the quality and competitiveness of products in a domestic and foreign market. In tourism, meanwhile, it is crucial to consider environmental values and historical objects, bicycle and walking routes, lakes, and everything else that determines the attractiveness of the region in terms of tourism and leisure. Popular tourist, leisure and health resorts attract many people today, not just pensioners. Many localities fail to take advantage of their potential and opportunities prompted by the region's area development and its creation of a specific atmosphere.

In order to carry out a reliable strategy analysis, it is necessary to look at the current state of affairs, and thus, provide strategy creation tools. These instruments are:

- 1) Collect and analyze data.

- 2) Get to know and assess the course of development processes that took place in the past.
- 3) Identify external functions.
- 4) Recognize internal resources that affect development.
- 5) Identify problem areas in management (Bagadziński 1997, p. 23).

Developing a good development strategy is a very difficult task, especially because it is necessary to thoroughly analyze all the pros of the *poviat*, with a view to maximizing their usability, and to remedy the existing problem areas.

***Poviat* image**

Image is a visualization of a specific designate, e.g. an institution or a county, a commune, or an enterprise. It is worth noting that, in colloquial language, the concepts of „identity” and „image” are often blurred and misunderstood. The conceptual range of these expressions, however, is not identical and cannot be used interchangeably. The main difference between an identity and an image is that the image is the external effect sprung from a visual stimulus. The identity, on the other hand, is the essence of the company, a way in which the enterprise wants to be identified by the recipients. Also the *poviat* can create its image in a proper way and be identified by recipients and residents.

In order to attract investors and people who will develop the local economy, they should be presented with a full offer. To this end, a favorable image and a clear identity are required. A good reputation or high prestige should be created by properly balancing the individual elements of image creation. Both the external appearance and what is „inside” a given *poviat* should be considered. To create the image of the *poviat*, one should use the image of the organization in the consciousness of people who come into indirect and direct contact with it; verify whether the image of local authorities is appropriate.

Identifying the image can also be considered in psychological terms. Each entity has its own image. It presents the mental state of the consumer before, during and after settling his or her case in the office. It is created through the relationships that the consumer establishes with the participants of the environment. The consumer paints a certain picture of a city/town, *gmina* or *poviat*. This picture can be true or false, depending on the situation, attitude of consumers or officials, expectations, fears, and experiences. In recent years, the attitude of civil servants towards consumers and clients has changed. An attempt has been made to shape a positive image through the adoption of marketing orientations in management. The image

created by the environment may be different, but at the same time stable over time. If the *poviat* enjoys a good image, this will probably not change overnight. This can be compared to shaping somebody's opinion of another human based on the first and subsequent impressions. In general, the first impression is the most important, and if it is bad, it takes a long time to readjust it. Human attitudes tend to change slowly, which is why a lot of effort, resources and engagement is required to create and maintain a good image (Olszewska 2001, p. 23).

A concept similar to image, and whose scope of meaning more or less overlaps with that of image, is reputation. Reputation is defined as an intangible asset of local authorities, and it depends not only on the quality of goods and services, but also on any activity of the organization towards the public (Cenker 2000, p. 42).

These two concepts of reputation and image describe similar phenomena from a different point of view. Reputation occurs when an abstract thing is recognized in monetary terms. However, a good image cannot be expressed in money. Instead, it can be compared with competition. Reputation is a narrower term than image, being determined by the opinion of local acquirers, whereas image is a statement of opinions and judgments held by residents, investors, journalists, and employees. On the basis of the above considerations, it can be concluded that both concepts must not be considered interchangeably and should be viewed as different.

In many cases, image is considered to be an effect of promotional instruments. This is not exactly true because advertising shapes the image without explaining its essence. Promotional tools may play a key role in shaping the image, despite seeing it as a result of a comprehensive impact of all marketing instruments (Żyminkowski 2003, p. 9).

The resources of the *poviat* around which the strategy can be formulated are difficult to imitate, which is an advantage that can be turned into a competitive advantage and the backbone of a promotional strategy (Dybała, Korenik 2010, p. 9).

Image marketing also has a major significance in image creation. Its task is to emphasize the advantages of a region in order to attract potential investors, residents or tourists.

The socio-economic characteristics of Chodzieski Poviat

Chodzieski Poviat (or Chodzież County) is located in the northern part of Wielkopolskie Province (or Greater Poland). It has the area of 685km² and is composed of five *gminas*: the urban Chodzież, the rural Chodzież and Budzyń, and the mixed Margonin and Szamocin. The *poviat's* population is less than 50,000, with a slightly larger female population. Chodzieski

Powiat shares border with the following *poviats*: Czarnkowski, Trzcianecki, Wągrowiecki, and Obornicki. Agricultural landscape is predominant in Chodzieski Powiat, and arable lands constitute approximately 56% of its area. In terms of climate, the *powiat* belongs to the so-called Nadnotecki district. Large forest areas and the Noteć valley favor the creation of a diverse microclimate. However, it is not just the natural values that prompt a positive image of the *powiat*. Chodzież Land has been part of Wielkopolskie Province for a long time, and its history is marked by heroic deeds and daily human labor. These lands have often been visited presidents, among them: Stanisław Wojciechowski, Ignacy Mościcki, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, and Ryszard Kaczorowski. The *powiat's* village towns from royal localities have formed part of the travel route of contemporary presidents.

Among the tasks of the *powiat* that have been included in the strategy and have had a significant impact on creating a positive image is the modernization of infrastructure. The role of the communication infrastructure is particularly important due to the development opportunities of the local economy sectors. Among them, tourism plays a major role. In the financial perspective 2007-2013, the *powiat* benefited from EU funds in the implementation of road investments. The development of tourism, sport and recreation also build a positive image of the *powiat* due to the numerous newly built or modernized sports and recreation facilities. Tourism is one of the well-developing areas of the local economy there. It is one of the sources of well-being and a method of counteracting unemployment and boosting the labor market as a whole. Fostering economic growth, including by creating the image and development of the labor market, is a basic element of the development policy formulated in local government acts in Poland. Therefore, among the conditions of *powiat* development, tourism plays the principal role.

When considering the economic potential of Chodzieski Powiat, the number of active business entities should be mentioned, which is currently at approximately 4,000. The main economic center is the city of Chodzież which excels particularly in the areas of trade, industry, transportation services and the wood industry. The main pillar of the *powiat's* economic potential are microenterprises: more than 90% of business entities in the *powiat* are micro-enterprises employing up to 10 people.

Positive image creation in Chodzieski Powiat

Every human activity, individual or collective, has specific goals. People work to satisfy various needs. The objectives of the *powiat* strategy derive from the identification of resources

and the analysis of development potentials of the *poviat* made in the diagnosis, in combination with the SWOT analysis and the *poviat* development vision. In recent years, the image of Chodzieski Poviat has improved significantly. In a research study carried out by the Local Action Group for the purposes of the LEADER program among the local residents, concerning the most important social areas, an observation can be made that the strategy is mainly concerned with the issues of the economy and jobs. The results of the research on the most important areas to which strategic objectives should refer are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Research results on the main areas of strategic goals

Item	Responses (%)
Economy and jobs	60%
Transportation infrastructure and communication	44%
Tourism and protection of natural values	44%
Social services:	
- Education	32%
- Medical services	30%
- Social services, public safety and others	20%

Source: own study based on the Strategy for Socio-Economic Development of Chodzieski Poviat for 2011-2020 (<http://powiat-chodzieski.pl/index.php?cmd=13>)

The *poviat*, striving to improve its image, tries to fulfill the vision that the residents put forward through the objectives included in the strategy. The results of research, conducted with the participation of nearly 500 local residents from various social groups of working age, show that the economy is an important area of concern for the public. Therefore, the strategic goal included in the strategy is to support the development of entrepreneurship and the creation of new jobs. The basic condition for the development of entrepreneurship and the creation of jobs is stimulation and provision of conditions for launching companies and self-employment. Further infrastructure development is needed in the *poviat*, too. Today, it is not enough to offer armed areas to entrepreneurs and investors. The implementation of the objective is aimed at increasing employment and using the potential of the people who are leaving agriculture and sectors that are losing economic significance. The second area distinguished by the residents is tourism and protection of natural values. The goal in this area is, above all, to promote tourism so as to increase the share of tourist services in the economy, and therefore increase employment and revenues. Tourism is both a social phenomenon and an economic field of an interdisciplinary nature. It has a creative impact on the development of many other activities. It is also characterized by a high engagement of human labor. In this way, it generates numerous jobs. The development of tourist activities and the recovery of the

entire economy with its help is in the interest of residents and entities providing tourist services, as well as local governments in *gminas* and *poviats* who can count on increased budget revenues from income taxes imposed on natural and legal persons. Therefore, the creation of a positive image of the *poviat* is achieved with the participation of residents, for the benefit of residents, and also for the benefit of the local government. The image of the *poviat*, to be achieved through the selection of the right strategy, also relies on the use of external support measures, as well as geographical location and landscape values used for the development of infrastructure. A good *poviat* is one that provides employment and high-quality public services, as well as one that contributes to ensuring safety and improving the quality of life of its residents and visitors.

The image of Chodzieski Poviat corresponds to its mission. It involves the undertaking, together with strategic partners and residents, of various activities using all development factors, including the wisdom of the people and the skills derived from their cooperation, so as to create a positive image, strive for a sustainable vision, and achieve the assumed objectives. Therefore, Chodzieski Poviat residents have a real influence on the creation of the image of their region, knowing that the vision and the mission of the Strategy have been developed with the participation of the local community.

Conclusions

When assessing the Strategy as an image creation tool, it is necessary to take into account not only those cases in which everything works out well, goals are achieved consistently, and objectives outlined in the Strategy are realized on time. Crisis situations may also occur and they do not always have a positive impact on the image of the *poviat*. Social communication plays a major role in this context. The more the public is involved in the formulation of development strategies, the more they identify with these strategies, and in doing so, the more supportive they are of the *poviat* and its striving for the creation of a positive image. In order to prevent the image of the *poviat* from deteriorating, it is necessary to evaluate the implementation of the strategy in the mid-term, and to encourage the local community to voluntarily engage in the active implementation of its specific goals. Importantly, community involvement should take place in the least demanding, effective and possibly most accessible way. These can be civic initiatives for improving and making towns more attractive, or voluntary undertaking of social work or services. Based on the activities and measures

described in this paper, the Strategy can be said to constitute an instrument for creating a positive image of Chodzieski Powiat.

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