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AN URBAN DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY AS A TOOL FOR IMPLEMENTING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND BUILDING RESILIENCE

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Abstract

Purpose. Urban authorities face numerous challenges, including suburbanisation, ageing populations, transport congestion, pollution. Development strategies are essential tools for implementing sustainable development (SD) and building urban resilience (UR) to external shocks, such as economic and social crises, climate threats, or pandemics. The aim of this article is to assess the approach adopted by city authorities to implementing SD and strengthening UR based on their development strategies.
Methodology. A questionnaire survey conducted in 33 Polish cities enabled an analysis of these cities' development strategies regarding their timeframes, stated objectives, and diagnostic areas. Furthermore, in-depth interviews with representatives from 7 Polish cities provided insights into the barriers and challenges associated with implementing SD, as well as perceptions of UR.
Findings. The study concludes that while the authorities of Polish cities are aware of the importance of SD, the low engagement of stakeholders and the absence of local leadership present significant barriers to its practical implementation. Notably, UR was not included as a component of any development strategy, indicating a lack of awareness in this area, which could lead to more severe consequences in the future.

Key words: sustainable development, urban resilience, development strategy, urban authorities

Klasyfikacja JEL: Q01, Q54, R58.

Introduction

Urban development has accelerated in recent decades due to demographic, social, economic, and technological changes. By 2050, it is projected that 68% of the world's population will live in cities, an increase of 13% (United Nations, 2018). At the same time, primarily young people between the ages of 15 and 35 are migrating to cities (Kashnitsky et al., 2021). The main reason for migration is the lack of job opportunities in residents' places of origin and the marginalization of rural areas (Jaszczak et al., 2021). Cities, especially agglomerations and provincial capitals, offer opportunities for self-development, a dynamic labor market, and a wide range of recreational and leisure activities. As a result, they are an attractive destination for young people from rural areas and small towns.

The most important urban challenges include suburbanization, i.e., the phenomenon of uncontrolled urban sprawl into suburban areas (Demazière, 2022). This is due, on the one hand, to rising property prices in the city center and, on the other, to the desire to live away from the hustle of the city while still being close to it. Suburbanization forces residents to travel frequently to the city center for work, education, or leisure. This contributes to traffic congestion, as suburban development often outpaces the expansion of public services in the area (Korwel-Lejkowska, 2021). Suburbanization may also contribute to the depopulation of the city center and the creation of so-called pockets of poverty (Piber, 2021). Local communities are aging, which will require the provision of public services tailored to their needs in the future (Szopa, 2016). Modern cities are also facing environmental pollution, particularly air pollution and noise emissions (Corbella & Drach, 2017). To minimize the negative impact of these challenges on urban development, city authorities should focus on shaping urban policies in line with the principles of sustainable development (SD).

SD forms the foundation for urban and regional development in the European Union. The concept of SD can be broadly defined as socio-economic development with environmental protection as its overarching objective (Lupi & Marsiglio, 2021). SD is included in strategic and planning documents at various levels. At the city level, the most important document shaping its development is the development strategy (Czarnecka & Sobotka, 2019). It is a tool for achieving long-term objectives, leading to a desired state of development (Legutko-Kobus, 2011). By definition, the process of creating a development strategy should be based on the cooperation of various stakeholder groups. Following the 2008 financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2021, flexibility and resilience have become increasingly important. External shocks can disrupt the process of achieving the strategy's objectives while also eroding trust in local authorities (Meerow & Newell, 2019).

The aim of this article is to assess how city authorities are approaching the implementation of SD and the enhancement of resilience to external shocks as part of their development strategy. The article is divided into three parts. The first part presents the definitions of sustainable development and identifies the barriers and challenges to its implementation. The concept of UR is then discussed, followed by an exploration of key elements of a development strategy, with a focus on the role of stakeholders. The second part outlines the methods used in detail. In the third section, the research results are discussed. Finally, the conclusions are summarized.

1. Literature review

1.1. Sustainable urban development: a key challenge for city authorities

SD is a concept that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, primarily due to the growing interest of researchers in issues such as resource scarcity and climate change (Meadows et al., 2014). It was noted at the time that the theory of unlimited economic growth was linked to negative consequences for the environment, local communities, and, in the long term, the economy itself. Initially, SD was defined in a very general and concise manner. However, the concept has evolved over time due to growing awareness and interest among researchers. Today, SD can be understood as socio-economic development focused on environmental protection, enhancing resilience, and improving the quality of life for the population through economic, social, and regulatory measures (Borys, 2011; Liu et al., 2017; Silveira et al., 2021).

Cities, due to their functions and large populations, require a distinct approach to the implementation of SD, with an emphasis on systemic strategies and the active role of the community (Mierzejewska, 2015). The aim of implementing SD should not only be to achieve the goals outlined, among others, by the United Nations (2015), but, above all, to ensure a high quality of life. Quality of life is challenging to define, as it encompasses both economic and non-economic factors (Costa et al., 2021). In broad terms, quality of life can be defined as the extent to which the needs and expectations of a community are fulfilled (Wnuk et al., 2013), however, the perception of their satisfaction is subjective and, therefore, difficult to measure (Sofeska, 2017). Poor quality of life can be associated with, among other factors, environmental pollution, limited access to urban green spaces, inadequate public services, restricted access to the labour market, economic and political instability, or the emotional well-being of individuals (Hensher et al., 2003; Mouratidis, 2021; Sofeska, 2017).

For municipalities, the implementation of SD represents one of the key challenges. While the concept of SD is embedded in almost every strategic and programmatic document, the practical execution of specific actions remains difficult. This is primarily due to a lack of political will, which can result in reluctance to undertake concrete actions and investments and may also hinder the process of cultural change (Adetunji et al., 2005). Culture underpins the implementation of SD, alongside ethical and moral beliefs, which together serve as the primary motivation for transitioning to a more pro-environmental lifestyle. Low environmental awareness within the local community diminishes pressure on local authorities, effectively hindering urban transformation or even diverting development onto an unsustainable trajectory (Zameer & Yasmeen, 2022). Turner (2017) on the other hand, highlighted the absence of legal and administrative regulations. The lack of legal provisions regarding urban spatial development and construction leads to inaction on the part of developers, exacerbating the phenomenon of urban sprawl. Many researchers emphasize the importance of stakeholder participation. According to Kinzer (2018), the effective implementation of SD principles requires cooperation with a wide range of stakeholders, including NGOs, residents, and entrepreneurs. However, the level of public participation in Poland remains relatively low (Kalisiak-Mędelska, 2015), which leads to issues such as conflicts between stakeholders, increasing dissatisfaction, and delays in action. Insufficient funding should also be highlighted, particularly in the area of infrastructure investments (Obaideen et al., 2024). This is a problem primarily affecting small and medium-sized

cities, particularly those experiencing depopulation. Low tax revenues and a lack of external funding may lead municipalities to refrain from making investments.

The concept of SD emerged in response to progressive climate change, but in cities, its implementation must be adapted to their systemic nature. From a municipal perspective, the practical application of SD faces challenges due to legal, social, and financial barriers. Overcoming these obstacles is essential for shaping sustainable cities.

1.2. Increasing UR as both a response to challenges and an opportunity for development

Rapid urbanisation and the growing unpredictability of phenomena are leading to significant challenges in areas such as the environment, mobility, socio-economic development, and urban policies (Ernstson et al., 2010). The concept of UR is therefore of growing importance and is understood as the ability to absorb shocks (called the Black Swans) and maintain balance by adapting to sudden events (Masnavi et al., 2019). Emergencies are events that are inherently unpredictable, such as pandemics, wars, population migrations, and economic crises. As Glaeser (2022) argues, cities generally handle sudden events affecting social capital and the physical environment well, with economic and political shocks representing the greatest threats. Figure 1 provides a model representation of UR.

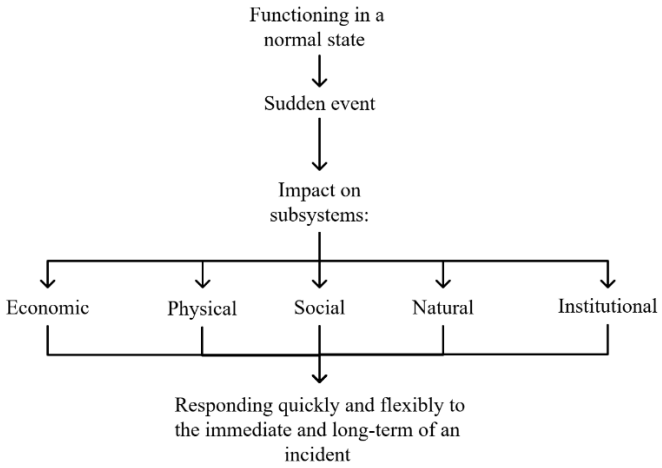

Figure 1. Framework for UR
Source: own elaboration based on Suárez et al. (2016).

The greatest challenge lies in anticipating emergencies and preparing for their impact in advance (Cariolet et al., 2019). There remains a lack of tools to evaluate and enhance systems designed to build UR (Ribeiro & Pena Jardim Gonçalves, 2019). The methods and tools employed should be tailored to the specific city, taking into account its economic, social, institutional, natural, and physical characteristics. As Zheng et al.(2018) point out, urban development often conflicts with resilience.

UR should be regarded as a concept that supports the achievement of SD and aligns directly with the SD goals (Mallick et al., 2021). Cities that respond quickly to sudden events are better

equipped to manage sustainable urban development. Achieving SD goals is challenged by the ongoing climate crisis, uncertainties in national policies, population migration, and macroeconomic crises. Developing coping strategies can support city authorities in long-term planning (Grum & Kobal Grum, 2023). As Bautista-Puig et al. (2022) argue, researchers rarely explore the relationship between UR, SD, and the economic dimension of resilience. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that a flexible and swift response to emergencies can accelerate cities' transformation towards SD and mitigate the effects of crises.

1.3. Development strategy: the key document shaping the city's development path

Planning a long-term path for the city's development is crucial to implementing the concept of SD and building UR. A development strategy is the key tool for executing development policy (Kowalewski, 2024). Preparing such a document at the level of the smallest organisational units, such as municipalities, is optional and depends mainly on the political will of the local authorities. Notably, urban municipalities are more likely to employ strategic management and plan their local development (Kowalewski, 2024), which can be defined as development with the primary goal of achieving socio-economic growth while addressing the needs and expectations of stakeholders and utilizing available resources (Musioł-Urbańczyk & Sorychta-Wojsczyk, 2016).

As stressed by Legutko-Kobus (2011) the development strategy should also consider corrective and adaptive functions, such as UR. It must align with higher-level strategic documents, such as regional and national ones. Each strategy should integrate the concept of SD, as outlined in international and national frameworks. Following the approach of Eakin et al. (2022), a development strategy should encompass both SD objectives and the constraints and contradictions of development. However, this does not guarantee the effectiveness of the strategy. The effectiveness of a development strategy is determined by the feasibility of its objectives (Sztando, 2010). These objectives should be based on a diagnosis of the city's current state, considering external factors, available resources, and the scope of implemented activities.

The participation of diverse stakeholder groups is essential for a development strategy. Poor-quality participatory processes, lack of meaningful communication, or low stakeholder interest may lead to an ineffective strategy, increased conflicts, or dissatisfaction with city authorities' actions (Uittenbroek et al., 2019). The key challenge for city authorities is to engage stakeholders in shaping the city's development strategy. Innovative participatory tools, such as social media, Geographical Information Systems (GIS), and visualisation techniques, are helpful in this regard (Toukola & Ahola, 2022). These tools can effectively encourage youth and young adults to participate. Participatory processes help city managers understand stakeholders' real needs and expectations, enabling more precise planning.

Effective management of the city's development, considering the principles of SD and UR, necessitates a comprehensive plan. A development strategy comprises key components, such as a diagnosis of the current state, a SWOT analysis, the city's mission and vision, development objectives, and a list of key investments (Gruszecka-Tieśluk, 2013). It provides a comprehensive framework for the city's development, facilitates the systematic achievement of SD objectives, and helps authorities prepare for emergencies through development scenarios.

2. Methodology

The stated aim of the article required the triangulation of research methods, involving both quantitative and qualitative approaches (see Figure 2). Triangulation facilitates a holistic approach to the subject of the study but demands the researcher maintain methodological rigour (Todd, 1979).

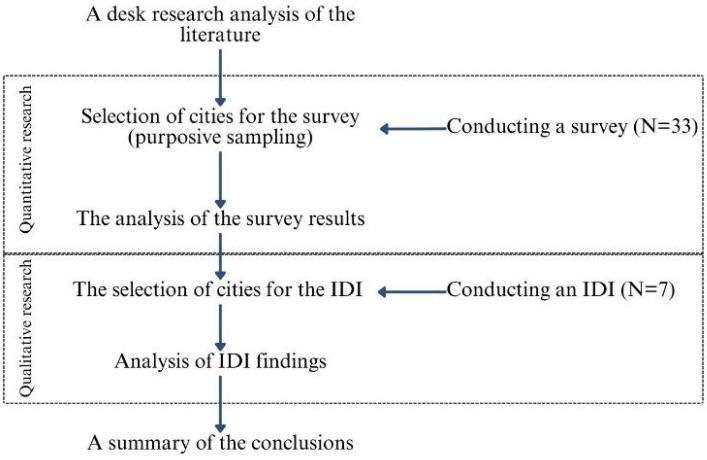

Figure 2. The research procedure applied

Source: own elaboration.

The proprietary research was preceded by a literature review conducted using the desk research method, which is well-suited for identifying research gaps and characterizing the status quo (Topolewski et al., 2023). A survey method with purposive sampling and in-depth interviews (IDI) was then employed.

The surveys targeted purposively selected cities (N=66), identified based on their inclusion in six sustainability rankings as of 2022: Ranking of Polish Sustainable Cities, Ranking of Polish Local Governments, Ranking of Polish Cities of the Future 2050, Ranking of Green Cities, Innovation City Index, and European Smart City Index. A survey questionnaire consisting of 28 questions on development strategies, participation, and knowledge of SD was sent to representatives of municipal offices. The survey was conducted using the CAWI technique between August 1 and September 30, 2023 (Mącik & Korba, 2010). The responses received (N=33) were statistically analyzed. Among the cities that participated in the study, there were 72.7% large cities with over 100,000 inhabitants and 27.3% medium-sized cities with populations between 20,000 and 100,000. The sample did not include any small cities with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants.

This was followed by IDI based on an interview scenario, allowing for a deeper exploration of the survey findings and identification of areas not addressed in the questionnaire (Miński, 2017). A request to participate in the interview was sent to the municipal offices that responded to the survey questionnaire. Seven units (21.2%) confirmed their willingness to participate. The IDIs were conducted between 01 February and 31 March 2024 on the MS Teams platform. If the interviewee consented, the interviews were recorded; otherwise, detailed notes were taken (Lucas, 2014). The results of the IDI were analyzed in detail and compared with the survey results.

This comparison enabled conclusions to be drawn regarding the link between SD and UR as key elements of the development strategy.

3. Findings

All the analysed cities have up-to-date development strategies. For 75.8% of the cities, the validity period of the document is considered important, while for 21%, the validity period is no longer applicable. For only one city, the validity period is deemed very important, which constitutes 3% of all the analysed cities. City authorities place significant importance on the time frame for which the document is prepared. Key elements of each strategy include the vision and mission, as well as the alignment of the document with other documents crucial for the organisation's development (see Figure 3).

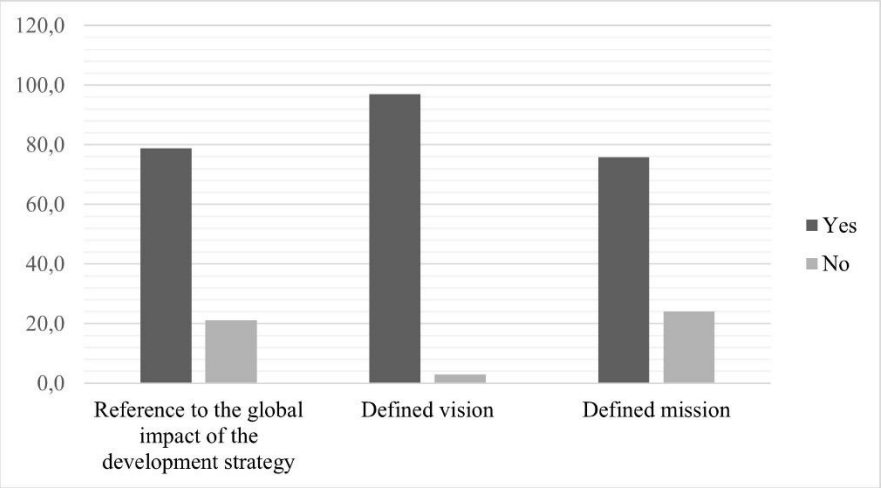

Figure 3. Inclusion of individual elements in the development strategies (in %)
Source: own elaboration.

78.8% of the analysed cities incorporated global impacts into their strategies, referring to documents at the international level. However, this percentage can be considered relatively low given Poland's membership in the European Union. Among the cities analysed, 32 defined their city vision in their development strategies, outlining the general direction for the city's development. In contrast, the city mission was defined by 75.8% of all cities. Consequently, 24.2% of the cities did not outline the priorities and values that guide their activities.

The development strategies of the analysed cities predominantly indicated alignment with national documents, such as the National Strategy for Regional Development, the Sustainable Transport Development Strategy until 2030, the Regional Development Strategy at the Voivodeship Level, and the Spatial Development Plan at the Voivodeship Level (see Figure 4).

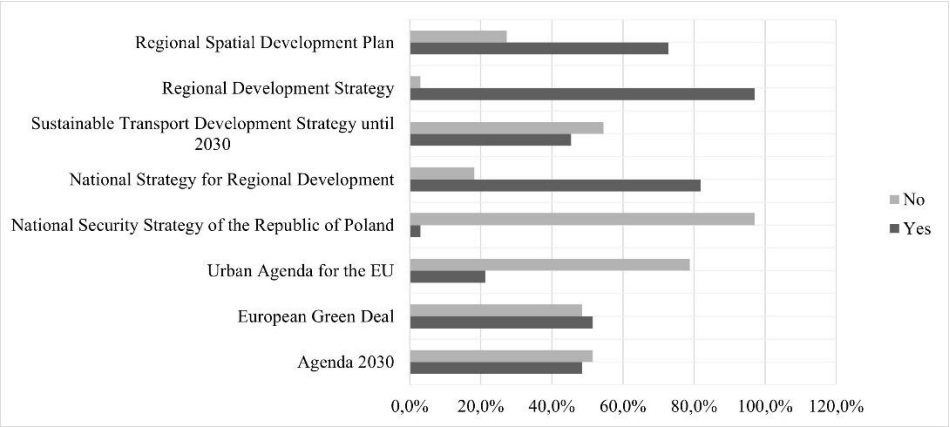

Figure 4. Documents considered in the development strategies of the surveyed cities (in %)
Source: own elaboration.

However, only one city referred to the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland, which is concerning in light of the ongoing war in Ukraine and the resulting threats to Poland. Furthermore, only 48.5% of the cities referenced the Agenda 2030, 51.5% referred to the European Green Deal, and 21% mentioned the Urban Agenda for the European Union. This suggests a lack of a sense of belonging to a community of European cities and indicates that the inclusion of these documents may be driven more by compliance requirements than by aspirations for global responsibility.

All cities reported familiarity with the concept of SD and knowledge of its implementation. Understanding the implementation of SD goals facilitates the planning of concrete actions; however, the absence of a clear vision or mission can impede the sustainable transformation of a city due to undefined main goals and priorities. For 97% of the cities, including a definition of SD in the strategy is considered very important and relevant, as it enhances the document's accessibility for other stakeholders, such as residents or entrepreneurs, who may lack comprehensive knowledge of SD and its practical applications. Simultaneously, insufficient stakeholder awareness can lead to conflicts among stakeholders, as confirmed by the IDIs conducted. Table 1 presents the characteristics of the interviewees.

Table 1. Characteristics of interviewees

Code	Role fulfilled	Conversation type
I1	Head of Department	Online
I2	Inspector of Department	Online
I3	Head of Department	Online
I4	Director and Coordinator	Online
I5	Head of Department	Online
I6	Office Manager	Online
I7	Specialist	Online

Source: own elaboration.

Development strategies in Polish cities are most often prepared for a period of 10 years, which may hinder the long-term planning of activities. This limitation, however, stems from the

requirement that such documents should not cover a timeframe exceeding that of higher-level documents, such as national and voivodeship strategies, as noted by interviewee I6. On the other hand, interviewee I4 emphasized the need to update strategies in response to changing conditions: *"When I look at the strategy we have at the moment, [...] it does not match what we are already doing now."* Conversely, interviewee I7 argued that *"a period of 10 years [...] is sufficient to implement the assumptions"*. Interviewee I5 indicated that the current development strategy spans a period of 15 years, which he described as *"long-term"*.

Resilience was not an important component of the development strategy because, as I5 pointed out, *"if the strategy was resilient, it would not be a strategy"*. In turn, I4 stressed that *"in our case [Poland], the resilience slogan is not yet as common as sustainability"*. Respondent I6 remarked that *"you cannot make a strategy for something we are not able to foresee"*. This indicates a misunderstanding of the concept of urban resilience, which is treated by officials as an attempt to anticipate change: *"anticipation is quite difficult because you have to play the role of a clairvoyant"*. In contrast, I2 noted that *"resilience activities, more broadly, are undertaken not in the form of specific documents, plans, programs, or strategies, but rather as ad hoc actions"*. I5 emphasized that resilience *"is a relatively new concept, and we are still learning it"*. However, it is fair to say that cities of all sizes can experience more or less dynamic changes. As I7 pointed out, *"medium-sized cities do not have such a dynamic of change"*. It is also worth noting that specific actions taken to increase a city's resilience do not always meet with stakeholders' approval. As I1 remarked: *"sometimes we found that residents wanted different solutions—more recreational rather than technical"*. This may stem from a lack of environmental awareness and education. These factors represent significant challenges in building UR (see Figure 5).

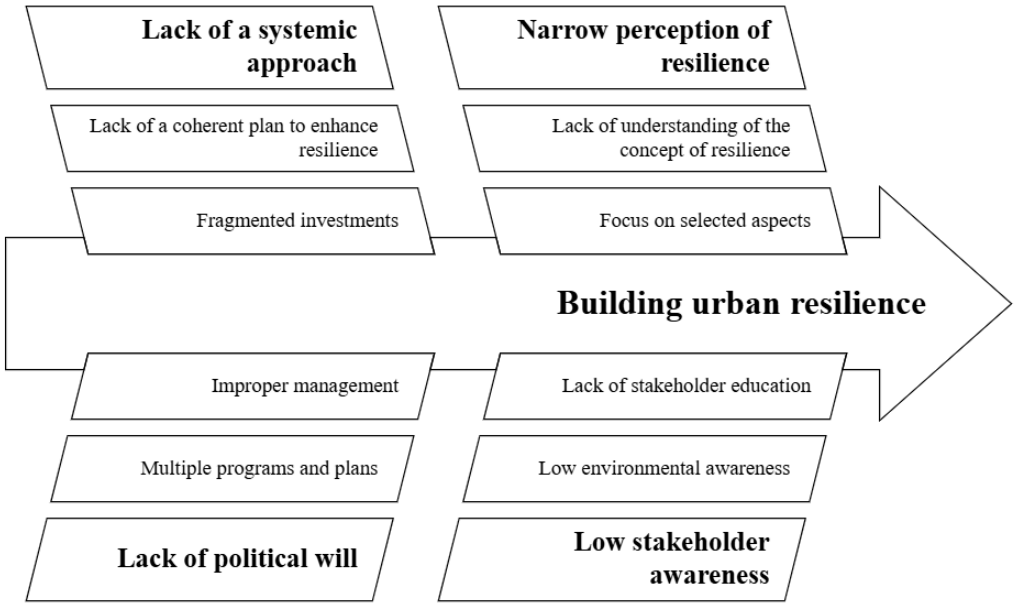

Figure 5. Challenges of increasing urban resilience

Source: own elaboration.

Challenges in building UR include the lack of a systemic, holistic approach to UR planning, which results in the implementation of fragmented investments, such as individual reservoirs instead of a comprehensive urban water retention system. This stems from a narrow perspective on UR, primarily viewed through the lens of climate change and armed conflict. As a result, UR measures focus on environmental protection and defense but do not encompass regulations addressing political or economic crises. In the event of emergencies related to these areas, cities can be severely affected.

Moreover, officials demonstrate limited engagement with UR. Emerging climate change adaptation plans exist as separate planning documents, as do defense strategies. This fragmented governance approach further exacerbates the disjointed nature of planning. Additionally, different stakeholder groups lack sufficient knowledge of both SD and UR, leading to insufficient pressure on municipalities to adopt a more integrated approach.

Conclusion

Today's cities face numerous and diverse challenges across various aspects of their functioning, including transport and mobility, urban planning, social policy, and the natural environment. Regardless of a city's size, the escalating negative effects of these challenges can diminish residents' quality of life (Borys, 2011). Therefore, socio-economic development should consider the needs of both current and future generations, enhancing their quality of life while preserving the natural environment (United Nations, 2015).

However, the occurrence of Black Swans can delay or completely halt the process of sustainable transformation, leading to negative consequences for local communities (Masnavi et al., 2019). Therefore, cities should prepare for their potential occurrence by developing rapid and flexible response tools. A key instrument supporting the implementation of SD and UR is the city development strategy, which enables the structuring of main and operational goals in a long-term perspective, aligned with the city's vision and mission (Kowalewski, 2024; Legutko-Kobus, 2011). As Glaeser (2022) emphasized, city authorities should pay particular attention to their ability to respond to political and economic crises.

A study has shown that medium and large cities in Poland recognize the importance of the SD concept and incorporate its principles into their development strategies (Eakin et al., 2022). However, the lack of implementation of UR elements undermines the effectiveness of SD, as highlighted by Mallick et al. (2021). Officials pointed out that the UR concept is relatively new in Poland, making it difficult to define and, consequently, challenging to implement. This observation is supported by the findings of Grum & Kobal Grum (2023). One of the key challenges in implementing SD and UR is low stakeholder awareness, primarily due to a lack of education and the poor quality of participatory processes. Zheng et al. (2018) noted that urban development often conflicts with the concept of resilience, and the study suggests that stakeholder resistance is at the root of this conflict. Therefore, high-quality participatory processes could play a crucial role in supporting the implementation of SD and UR, as emphasized by Uittenbroek et al. (2019) and Kinzer (2018).

Currently, the UR concept in Poland needs to be standardized and formally defined at the national level. The standardization of urban policy-making principles would enable coherent and long-term urban development planning in alignment with SD while considering potential risks

such as Black Swans. Recent years have demonstrated the importance of this approach, yet it often conflicts with stakeholder expectations. Polish cities still do not fully identify with the European Urban Community, leading to a lack of reference to the long-term development vision outlined in EU strategic documents. As a result, their development progresses at a slower pace compared to other European cities, and the resulting gap may weaken their resilience and ability to respond to crises.

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STRATEGIA ROZWOJU MIAST JAKO NARZĘDZIE WDRAŻANIA ZRÓWNOWAŻONEGO ROZWOJU I BUDOWANIA ODPORNOŚCI

Abstrakt

Cel. Władze miejskie mierzą się z wieloma wyzwaniami, do których zaliczyć można m.in. proces suburbanizacji, starzenie się społeczeństw, kongestię transportową, zanieczyszczenie środowiska. Strategia rozwoju stanowi podstawowe narzędzie wdrażania założeń idei zrównoważonego rozwoju oraz budowania odporności na szoki zewnętrzne, takie jak kryzysy ekonomiczno-społeczne, zagrożenia klimatyczne czy pandemie. Celem artykułu jest zidentyfikowanie podejścia władz miejskich do wdrażania zrównoważonego rozwoju i budowania odporności na podstawie strategii rozwoju.
Metodologia. Przeprowadzone badania ankietowe 33 polskich miast pozwoliły na przeanalizowanie strategii polskich miast pod względem okresu ich obowiązywania, uwzględnianych w nich celów oraz obszarów diagnozy. Uzupełniająco przeprowadzono bezpośrednie wywiady pogłębione z przedstawicielami 7 polskich miast, które umożliwiły zidentyfikowanie barier i wyzwań wdrażania zrównowazonego rozwoju oraz postrzegania odporności miejskiej.
Wnioski. Na podstawie badań można uznać, iż władze polskich miast posiadają wiedzę na temat wdrażania idei zrównoważonego rozwoju, jednak niska aktywność interesariuszy oraz brak lokalnych liderów stanowią poważną barierę praktycznej jej implementacji. Odporność miasta nie stanowiła elementu strategii rozwoju w żadnym mieście, co wskazuje na niewielką wiedzę w tym zakresie, co może prowadzić do bardziej dotkliwych skutków.

Słowa kluczowe: zrównoważony rozwój, odporność miejska, strategia rozwoju, władze miejskie

Klasyfikacja JEL: Q01, Q54, R58.

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