

Country Housewives' Associations as Social Economy Entities and Their Areas of Activity in Poland

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Abstract: **Background:** The aim of the article is to present the areas of activity of Country Housewives' Associations in Poland and their role in local communities. The author will discuss this matter in the context of the Act of November 9, 2018 on Country Housewives' Associations.

Research design and methods: The paper conducts a conceptual and theoretical analysis of the basic assumptions of social economy and entrepreneurship and of Country Housewives' Associations as social economy entities, and reviewed the literature in this area. The study also involved the conduction of original survey research.

Results: The research results indicate that Country Housewives' Associations are active in various areas, including social, integration, and educational. In the course of their activities, they face many barriers. Members' awareness of the social economy is at a low level.

Conclusions: The activity of Country Housewives' Associations as social economy entities in Poland plays an important role in local communities. The scope of the article encompasses only a fragment of the reflections, and scholars may supplement it with new data over time.

Keywords: social entrepreneurship, economy, social, Country Housewives' Associations, Poland

JEL Codes: J43, J62, Q19

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1. Introduction

The social economy, whose essence is activity based on solidarity, cooperation, and meeting social needs, has gained importance in recent decades as an alternative to traditional economic models. Poland has a wide range of social economy entities, such as associations, foundations, social cooperatives, social integration centers, or vocational activity centres. The catalog of entities also includes Country Housewives' Associations (sometimes, the name is also translated as Rural Women's Associations or Rural Women's Clubs), which are one of the oldest forms of social organizations still operating in Poland.

We aimed to present the areas of activity of Country Housewives' Associations in Poland and their role in local communities. Country Housewives' Associations constitute an independent, self-governing, and social organization of the rural population, aiming to support the development of local entrepreneurship and to actively improve and develop the rural environment. Moreover, the Country Housewives' Associations aim to be particularly active for women

and their families, including representing their interests and influencing the improvement of the socio-occupational situation. Therefore, the Associations also intend, among other things, to counteract social exclusion. It also concerns the situation of unequal access to rights and institutions determining the order of the expected arrangement of social functions and roles (Krawiec, 2019).

This topic was discussed in the context of the Act of November 9, 2018 on Country Housewives' Associations. Analyzing the activities of Country Housewives' Associations as social economy entities. An attempt was made to answer the following research questions: In what areas do Country Housewives' Associations conduct their activities? What barriers to functioning do the Country Housewives' Associations face? How do the members of the Country Housewives' Associations understand the social economy?

The article presents a literature review that includes a discussion of economic theory and the positioning of social economy within it. The theoretical section outlines the key assumptions and definitions of the social economy and characterizes the entities operating in this sector, with particular emphasis on Country Housewives' Associations as important participants in the local social economy. The subsequent part of the paper presents the results of the author's own research concerning the areas of activity of rural women's associations, the barriers they face in their functioning, and how their members understand the concept of social economy. The article concludes with a summary of the main findings.

2. Literature Review

The changes that have occurred in Poland over several decades, i.e., the nineteenth-century social movements, the First and Second World Wars, the political transformation, and Poland's entry into the European Union, have increased the demands placed on the social economy. Out of this current, social economics has emerged as an alternative approach to the control of scarce resources in the economy that distinguishes itself from traditional neoliberal models. The main objective of this trend is to combine economic efficiency with the realization of social and solidarity values. Social economy is not only a new approach to the essence of economics, but represents a specific segment of economic activity located in a triangle with sides defined by market economy, civil society, and democratic state (Hausner, 2008). The location of social economy in such a triangle assumes that it should foster the reconciliation of different rationalities ascribed to the market (allocative rationality), the state (distributive rationality), and society (solidarity rationality) (Kwaśnicki, 2005). The social economy represents a new proposal for solving social problems, and this, to some extent, constitutes the innovation of this approach (Pach, 2018).

According to the Act of August 5, 2022 on Social Economy, we should understand the concept of social economy as the activity of social economy entities for the benefit of the local community in terms of social and professional reintegration, creation of jobs for people at risk of social exclusion, and provision of social services, realized in the form of economic activity, public benefit activity and other paid activity. Many researchers have attempted to characterize and define the solidarity economy, which they usually did by referring to the values that constitute the reference point for the operation of entities in this sector, their specific goals, and the legal forms proper to them (Hausner, 2008). According to Kaźmierczak and Rymśza (2007), we can understand social economy as a tool for the economic and social mobilization of neglected local communities/areas and as a form of increasing the participation of their

members/residents in economic exchange and public life. In this understanding, the social economy constitutes a space for generating alternative, non-state solutions. It is not conceived as an idea and a path of rejection of the market and the state, but as a path of systemic evolution. On the one hand, it serves as a practical means of addressing social problems on a local scale (neighborhood and solidarity economy, local public benefit services); on the other hand, it functions as a mechanism for deeper system-wide changes, including those relating to the market economy (corporate social responsibility) and the state (co-management, public-social-private partnerships) (Hausner, 2008).

The state plays a key role in the development of the social economy, both in terms of shaping an appropriate legal and institutional environment, actively contributing to the formation of such macro-social conditions that generate the soil for the organic growth of social economy initiatives and entities (Hausner, 2012). However, the key action for the development of the social economy in Poland should be an institutionalized multi-stakeholder (actors of various types) and multi-level (operating at various levels of the territorial organization of the state) partnership. Such a partnership implies mutual interaction, with a careful balance between rapprochement and autonomy, consisting of mutual respect, equal participation in decision-making, mutual accountability, and transparency (Hausner, 2012). As Wilkin (2008) emphasizes, the idea of the social economy, its building and dissemination, deserves comprehensive support. The positive aspects of the functioning of the solidarity economy go beyond the traditional criteria of economic evaluation, showing many beneficial externalities that strengthen social cohesion and democracy.

As "social economy," we understand two distinct concepts. They can be regarded as complementary concepts. The social economy refers to a sector that is on the borderline between the economy and social welfare. The social economy, in turn, refers to the economy as a whole and on the grounds of the Polish legal system, it has been included in Article 20 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland as one of the foundations of the social and economic system of the Republic of Poland – a social market economy based on freedom of economic activity, private property, and solidarity, dialogue and cooperation between social partners constitutes the basis of the economic system of the Republic of Poland (Constitution of the Republic of Poland, 1997). According to the National Program for the Development of the Social Economy, the social economy is a sphere of civic and social activity, which, through economic and public benefit activity serves professional and social integration of persons at risk of social marginalization, job creation, provision of social services of public interest (for the general interest), and local development (NAPES).

When defining the social economy, scholars usually adopt a structural-operational approach, i.e., the main features and actors included in it are identified, namely: social economy enterprises, solidarity economy initiatives with a strong civic dimension, and social entrepreneurship (Blicharz, 2022). Another perspective is also possible in which the social economy is a sector of the economy in which the social aspect is realized and the economy is purely market-based. Such a view is closer to liberals, who see the social economy as a way of mitigating the negative effects of the market economy and social tensions and, more recently, the effects of the crisis. With such an approach, ES is closer to social assistance in its activating edition than to the economy (Węsierska-Chyc, 2013). Noteworthy, one of the key functions ascribed to the social economy is counteracting social exclusion in groups at risk of social ostracism, which includes, among others, the long-term unemployed, those with low levels of education or low qualifications, the homeless, and the elderly. By stimulating their activation and integrating

them into the mechanism of the market economy, social economy initiatives participate in levelling socio-economic disparities (Pacut, 2015, p.139). Thus, the concept of social economy aims at socio-economic order and harmonization of economic, social, and environmental goals, on the basis of this concept, at least a systemic framework can be set, a kind of systemic signpost of principles of action for all stakeholders (Mączyńska & Pysz, 2020).

The concept of social entrepreneurship is linked to the constantly developing social economy. According to Hausner (2007), the mission of social enterprises is to create a material base for the operation of civic organizations, promote alternative forms of credit, strengthen social capital, regenerate local public space, realize the idea of citizenship, and facilitate the reform of the public service sector. According to Kerlin (2008), social entrepreneurship is any private activity conducted for the public good, implemented according to market strategies, but whose main objective is not profit maximization but the achievement of specific economic and social goals, and which proposes innovative solutions to the problems of social exclusion and unemployment. For some, social entrepreneurship is a dynamic process of combining vision, implementing change, and creating (Kuratko & Hodgetts, 2004). Noteworthy, in recent years, people have combined entrepreneurship with the intention to make a difference in the environment, to improve the life of a community, or to provide value, not only in a mercantile dimension but also, increasingly, in a more or less altruistic context (Popowska, 2018).

As there is no clear definition of social entrepreneurship. There are many approaches in the literature that point to its complex and multifaceted nature. In the subjective view, the key to the solution is the social entrepreneur, who is seen as a visionary – an individual capable of identifying and exploiting opportunities to realize a social mission and find innovative solutions to the community's social problems (Pacut, 2015). The subject matter is the analysis of an organization or social enterprise. It is treated as a collective concept defining organizations that work to achieve social goals. They can take a variety of legal forms, but are united by the principles of seeking solutions based on commercial experience to achieve social goals and being able to reinvest the profits of their activities for the benefit of the community (Haugh, 2010). These entities manifest a mindset of market orientation but with a focus on achieving social objectives. The important thing here is to combine financial and economic efficiency with the social mission. There is also a process approach, which involves describing the activities and processes undertaken to create and perpetuate social value. These processes include identifying a specific social problem and developing a targeted solution, assessing social impact, and designing a sustainable business model for the venture (Stanienda et.al., 2017, p. 39).

The most popular view of social entrepreneurship is that proposed by the European Research Network (EMES) established in 1996. It conducted a research project on the emergence of social enterprises in Europe. EMES emphasizes the economic and social characteristics that should define an entity. Social enterprises combine economic activity with a social mission that aims to build local trust, activate local communities, and meet the growing demand for services. Notably, social enterprises attach great importance to their autonomy and willingness to accept the economic risks associated with their ongoing socio-economic activities (Borowska, 2013, pp. 105–114).

Social enterprises are not only economically and socially “useful,” but also provide a space to inspire action, integrate local authorities and residents as a future-oriented driver of community development.

The aforementioned Act on Social Economy contains a catalog of social economy entities, which include, among others, social cooperatives, non-governmental organizations, persons

with disabilities, or the unemployed. Among the entities, the relatively least researched to date are Country Housewives' Associations. This is one of the oldest forms of social organization that still functions in Poland. Some point to the key date of 4 March 1866, when the Rural Housewives' Association was founded in the Prussian partitioned territory, specifically in Piaseczno near Gniezno. Over the years, depending on the situation (mainly political), the Country Housewives' Associations performed different functions and were active in different organizations.

The situation of the Country Housewives' Associations in Poland was not legally standardized for many years. The Act of November 9, 2018 on Country Housewives' Associations defined the forms and rules for the functioning of associations and the association of members. According to Article 2, the associations are organizations of a voluntary nature and independent of governmental and territorial administrative entities. The specific tasks of Country Housewives' Associations include conducting social, educational, and cultural activities in rural communities; conducting activities for the comprehensive development of rural areas; supporting the development of women's entrepreneurship; initiating and conducting activities to improve the living and working conditions of women in rural areas; popularizing and developing forms of cooperation, management, and rational methods of running households; representing the interests of rural women's associations to public administration bodies; developing folk culture, including in particular local and regional culture.

The establishment of a Country Housewives' Associations begins with an initiative, which must come from at least 10 people who live in a village, a village district within the administrative borders of a town, or a town of up to 5,000 inhabitants. The assembled group adopts the statutes, elects the founding committee in the form of a resolution, and applies for registration in the National Register of Country Housewives' Associations kept by the Agency for the Restructuring and Modernization of Agriculture. Country Housewives' Associations have two bodies: the members' meeting and the association's board of directors. The members' meeting of the association is the supreme body that comprises all members of the association who have not been suspended. The remit of this body includes, among other things: examining and approving the reports of the Board of Directors and discharging it; adopting the Association's directions, program of activities, and budget. In turn, the Association's Board has a mainly representative function. Notably, each Country Housewives' Association has its own statute, as it can create it on its own or adopt the model statute proposed in the annex to the Act of November 9, 2018 on Country Housewives' Associations. The model statute is based on the provisions of the Act, but in addition to that, it details the association's internal rules.

According to Article 21, the Country Housewives' Associations have their assets consisting of membership fees, donations, inheritances and bequests, income from their own activities, income from the association's assets, and public donations. In addition, §4 of the model statutes emphasizes that the assets are also increased by subsidies from the state budget and local government units. All income from the activities of the wheel is to be used for the fulfilment of the statutory objectives and may under no circumstances be distributed among the members.

One of the income sources of the Country Housewives' Associations is income-generating activities. According to the model statutes, income may come from, among other things: the sale of folk-art products, including handicrafts and folk and artistic crafts, or regional food, or the sale, rental, or lease of assets.

If the association does not have the status of a public benefit organization and the revenue from the above titles does not exceed PLN 100,000 for the previous tax year, it may also use

simplified revenue and cost accounting instead of full accounting. However, if the association does not meet the conditions of the provision, e.g., it sells products of a different type, then according to the Act of March 6, 2018, The Law on Entrepreneurs, the provisions on business activity apply and the association – becomes an entrepreneur.

In accordance with the Act and the Regulation of the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development on financial support from the state budget for the associations of Rural Housewives' Associations, Country Housewives' Associations may receive financial support for a given calendar year. This is possible if the association is registered in the National Register of Country Housewives' Associations and submits an application for financial aid to the relevant Agency for the Restructuring and Modernization of Agriculture by a specific deadline. Country Housewives' Associations can also obtain funding through grants, subsidies, and competitions. Throughout the year, many public and private institutions organize initiatives that allow the Country Housewives' Associations to raise additional funds.

3. Research Method and Material

A quantitative study (survey) was conducted using a survey questionnaire (CAWI).

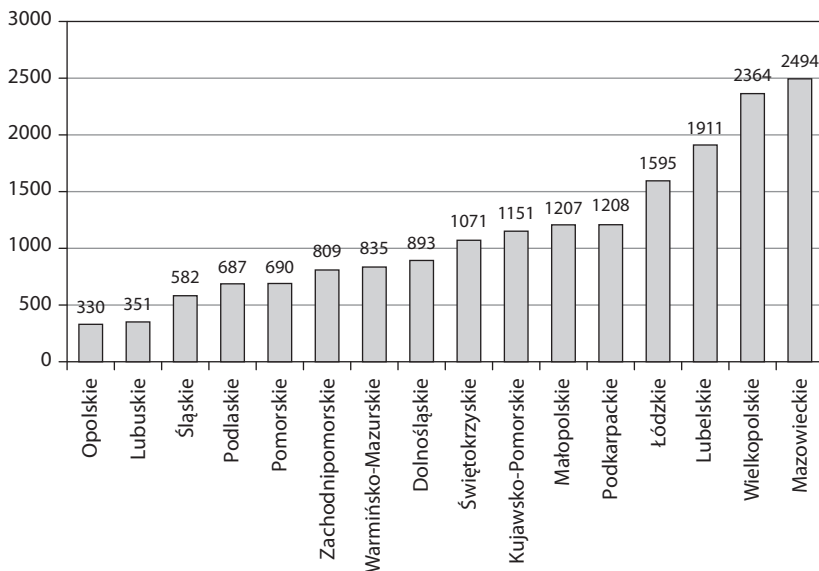


Figure 1. Country Housewives' Associations in Poland (as of May 15, 2025)

Note: based on the National Register of Country Housewives' Associations, <https://krkgw.arimr.gov.pl/>

As of May 15, 2025, there were 18,178 Country Housewives' Associations registered in Poland. Most associations were located in Mazowieckie Voivodeship – 2,494 associations (14%) and Wielkopolskie Voivodeship – 2,364 associations (13%). Lubelskie Voivodeship came third – 1,911 associations (11%), and Łódzkie Voivodeship – 1,595 associations (9%). The smallest number of Country Housewives' Associations was located in the following voivodeships: Opolskie – 330 (2%), Lubuskie – 351 (2%), and Śląskie – 582 (3%).

The respondents to the survey were members of Country Housewives' Associations from all over Poland, and the sample consisted of 464 persons. I invited women from two nationwide groups on the social networking site Facebook, which brings together members of Country Housewives' Associations, to participate in the study. The groups were the Nationwide Country Housewives' Associations Forum (23,455 group members as of March 31, 2023) and My KGW (20,484 group members as of March 31, 2023). I selected the survey sample using the purposive sampling method. The questionnaire was available online between February and March 2023. The questionnaire consisted of different types of questions, i.e., closed: single- and multiple-choice and semi-open questions.

By combining quantitative data (from the closed questions) and qualitative data (from the semi-open questions), it was possible to obtain a more complete picture of the situation and opinions of the surveyed group.

4. Results and Discussion

Respondents were asked what are the areas, in which the association they belong to is active. They could select several answers. Table 1 shows the number of indications and the percentage of responses.

Table 1. Areas of activity of Country Housewives' Associations

Area of activity	Number of responses	Percentage
Social activities , e.g., organization of picnics, festivals, special events	391	84%
Integration : integration activities of the population	304	66%
Cooking , e.g., cooking, making preserves	272	59%
Manual , e.g., handicraft: reeds, knitting, technical work	199	43%
Education , e.g., organization of workshops and training sessions	179	39%
Ethnocentrism , e.g., promoting: local culture, regional products	175	38%
Physical activity , e.g., excursions, gymnastics, dance courses	130	26%
Activities for women , e.g., activities to improve the living and working conditions of women in rural areas	115	25%
Cultural , e.g., music, theatre, dance performances	77	17%
Religious , e.g., pilgrimages, trips to sacred places	30	7%
Therapeutic , e.g., mind training, music therapy	6	1%
We do not participate in any activities	2	0%
Other	0	0%

The results of the study indicate that over 84% of the respondents consider activity for the local community as the main area of activity of the Country Housewives' Associations. This is in line with the assumptions of the Act and the statutory objectives of the Country Housewives' Associations. In particular, this manifests itself through the organization of events of various nature aimed at integrating residents (an equally important area of activity of the associations, according to 66% of the respondents) and encouraging their social and civic participation.

A significant number of Country Housewives' Associations are active in the culinary area. According to 59% of respondents, the preparation of traditional dishes and preserves constitutes not only part of the statutory activity, but also an important source of income. Associations can sell products at local events, fairs, or directly in the associations' headquarters. Significantly, culinary products are also the subject of numerous competitions, as a result of which associations can obtain additional funds for the development of their activities.

Approximately 43% of respondents considered the manual area to be an important element of the activities of Country Housewives' Associations. This category is large and encompasses a variety of activities that associations can realize in different dimensions, including decorations, income-generating activities, or workshops.

The workshop dimension is linked to the educational area of activity of Country Housewives' Associations indicated by 39% of respondents. Through educational activities, the associations not only fulfil their statutory objectives, but also raise funds for further development. These activities are aimed at educating residents and promoting local activation and development. They can be free of charge (e.g., for schools and local communities) or paid (e.g., for organized groups). For 38% of the respondents, Country Housewives' Associations perform an important ethnocentric activity of promoting regional culture and traditional products.

Another area of activity for Country Housewives' Associations is physical activity, declared by nearly 26% of respondents. These activities often receive financing in the form of grants or funds. The target audience is primarily senior citizens. In this context, the activities of Country Housewives' Associations contribute not only to local development, but also to social economy objectives through the integration of people at risk of social exclusion.

Notably, one of the statutory objectives of the Country Housewives' Associations is activity for women. In total, 25% of respondents indicated this aspect. Through numerous initiatives, the Country Housewives' Associations contribute to improving women's quality of life in rural areas, strengthen their participation in the life of local communities, and promote their personal and professional development.

In summary, the activities of Country Housewives' Associations cover a wide spectrum of activities, from social integration, education, cultural and physical activities, to support for ethnocentrism and activities for women. The implementation of these activities contributes to the all-round development of local communities, supporting both cultural, economic, and social aspects.

There are barriers to the activities of any organization. They can have a different range of impact, i.e., high (they affect the organization's activities to a significant extent); medium (they are a barrier that affects the organization's activities, but not to a significant extent), and low (they affect the organization, but do not significantly affect the organization's activities).

We asked respondents what were the main difficulties faced by the associations they belong to. We analyzed the collected answers, and below we present the percentage of indications.

The largest number of respondents (50%) indicated low member involvement as one of the key problems in the organization's activity. Commitment is a multidimensional concept, but in the context of the functioning of this type of organization, it plays a key role in ensuring smooth operation. The second key problem mentioned was the lack of interest in the associations' activities on the part of the local community, as indicated by 35% of respondents. As the associations' activities mainly cover the area of a given locality, cooperation with local authorities becomes extremely important. However, 32% of respondents declared a lack of support from representatives of the authorities, such as the mayor, councilors, or the head of the munic-

ipality. Another challenge for the functioning of the associations is the problem of financing activities, indicated by 29% of respondents. In turn, 28% of the respondents pointed to a lack of information regarding support opportunities for the organization, such as grants, training, or projects.

Table 2. Barriers to the activities of Country Housewives' Associations

No.	Barrier	Percentage
1.	Low involvement of members, e.g., due to lack of time	50%
2.	Lack of interest from the local community	35%
3.	Lack of support from local authorities	32%
4.	Problems with financing the activities	29%
5.	Lack of information about opportunities for KGW, e.g., grants, training	28%
6.	Difficulties in attracting new members	20%
7.	Small number of members	16%
8.	Internal conflicts or disagreements among members	15%
9.	Low income from activities	14%
10.	Lack of ideas for new activities	10%
11.	We have no difficulties	8%
12.	Competition from other associations	6%
13.	Lack of premises	6%

Problems with a moderate impact on the organization's activities included those related to the internal structure and functioning of the association. In this group, respondents mentioned difficulties in attracting new members (20% of respondents), the small number of members (16%), internal conflicts or misunderstandings (15%), and lack of ideas for new activities (10%). Furthermore, 14% of respondents mentioned the low income generated from activities. Although the listed barriers do not pose an immediate threat to the activities of the associations, their long-term impact can lead to growing organizational problems, such as permanent conflicts or even the break-up of the association.

Problems with a lesser impact on the functioning of the organization include competition from other associations, as noted by 6% of respondents. This is particularly noticeable in the case of associations operating in neighboring towns. Moreover, 6% of respondents indicated the lack of their own premises as a significant obstacle to their activities. Notably, 8% of the respondents declared the absence of any difficulties in the activities of the association, which may indicate the efficiency of their organization and adaptation to local conditions.

The Country Housewives' Associations members were also asked about their understanding of the social economy. I asked a one-choice question and to indicate the most important association.

In total, 33% of respondents indicated that for them, the social economy is a way of defining an economic activity that combines social and economic objectives. In turn, a total of 23% of respondents see the social economy as a method of dealing with social problems and working for the benefit of society. For 15% of respondents, the social economy encompasses a range of entrepreneurial activities to activate those outside the labor market, i.e., those at risk of social

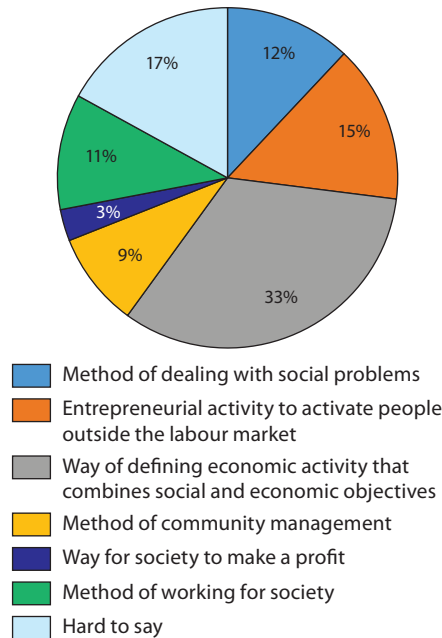


Figure 2. The concept of social economy as understood by members of Country Housewives' Associations

exclusion. According to 42 respondents (9%), it is a way of community management, and for 3%, the solidarity economy is an opportunity for society to make a profit. Unfortunately, not everyone has a high level of awareness of the social economy, as 17% of the surveyed group had difficulty answering this question. This may indicate a low awareness of the social economy among Country Housewives' Associations members.

5. Conclusions

The main objective of this article was to reflect on the areas of activity of Country Housewives' Associations in Poland and their role in local communities. Considering individual aspects, we can conclude that the results answered the posed research questions. The presented research results show that the activity of Country Housewives' Associations as social economy entities in Poland plays an important role in local communities. Detailed results of the study proved that:

1. Country Housewives' Associations conduct their activities in various areas, and these are mainly social, integration, culinary, and educational activities. In addition to fulfilling their mission and statutory objectives through these activities, the associations can also generate income from their activities, which they can then use for their own activities. As time goes by and new opportunities arise, it would be good for associations to broaden their horizons and thus their offerings and open up new avenues of social activity.
2. Associations also face many barriers. The biggest ones include low member involvement; lack of interest from the community and local government; problems with funding activities; lack of information about opportunities for associations, e.g., grants, subsidies; difficul-

ties in attracting new members. Many of these problems relate to the internal organization of the association's work and require solving through dialogue. Associations should also be bold and clearly communicate their needs directly to the responsible institutions.

3. Awareness of the social economy among members of Country Housewives' Associations in Poland remains low. The concept of social economy evokes various associations among respondents. Therefore, it would be worthwhile to educate members of Country Housewives' Associations as social economy entities in this area and thus present the opportunities that such membership gives them.

Although the study provides important data on the activities of Country Housewives' Associations in Poland, it also displays some limitations, which one should consider when interpreting the results. The research sample was unrepresentative, and, therefore, we cannot generalize the results to all Country Housewives' Associations in Poland. The respondents were selected randomly, but the limited number of participants and the diversity of organizations in terms of size, location, or scope of activities may have affected the data obtained. An additional limitation of the study is the possible selection bias, in that people more involved in the activities of the associations may have volunteered to participate in the study, which may have influenced the perception and evaluation of the problems studied.

The identified limitations point to the need for further research that considers a more representative sample and a broader spectrum of factors influencing the functioning of the associations. Nevertheless, the obtained results provide valuable conclusions that can form the basis for an in-depth analysis and formulation of recommendations for Country Housewives' Associations in Poland. Therefore, further in-depth research and analytical work on this relevant and timely issue is planned.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that the research took place without any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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