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Research paper

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# Analysis of social participation in the process of land consolidation based on selected cadastral precincts in Poland

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### **Summary**

This publication provides a detailed analysis of the results of social participation in the process of land consolidation in two adjacent cadastral precincts located in the Miechów County, Małopolskie Voivodeship. These are the Pogwizdów and Marcinkowice cadastral precincts, where land consolidation was carried out between 2018-2022. The concept of social participation is defined as the population's involvement in this process. An analysis of the relevant literature revealed that social participation is considered a key principle of the decision-making process. In this context, the issue under review appears important and timely. The research was conducted based on reliable and up-to-date documents on the land consolidation process in question, which were provided by the Krakow Office of Geodesy and Agricultural Land in Krakow. These documents contain important information on the local community's participation. Additionally, a survey with closed-ended questions, developed specifically for this study, was used. The survey was designed to allow respondents to assess their level of satisfaction with the land consolidation process, the public consultations, and their opinions on the process, as well as its impact. The survey participants included landowners and residents of the investigated cadastral precincts. The survey was conducted in both paper and electronic formats. It revealed that residents of the villages of Marcinkowice and Pogwizdów, who participated in the public consultations prior to the land consolidation works, were more satisfied with the results of the land consolidation than those who did not. This indicates a correlation between public participation and a positive perception of administrative actions.

# **Keywords**

social participation • land consolidation and exchange • post-consolidation development



## 1. Introduction

Land consolidation is one of the tools for shaping spatial management in rural areas. Many authors in Poland and worldwide have written about the technical, legal, organisational and economic effects of consolidation. These include, among others [Akińcza and Mastalska-Cetera 2017, Dacko 2006, Dudzińska and Prus 2017, Janus 2011, Taszakowski et al. 2016]. There is no doubt that land consolidation leads to the reorganisation of rural areas used for agricultural production. The construction of access roads, improvement of drainage systems and changes in the layout of plots of land are measures that create opportunities to increase farm productivity. In addition, consolidation is an occasion to regulate and improve the quality of cadastral data. The performed works facilitate the modernisation of the EGiB [Mika and Leń 2016a, b]. As it directly affects the residents of a given area, as well as their property, they participate in the consolidation process when making decisions, such as approving the consolidation project. Citizen participation in decision-making is referred to as social participation. In the case of consolidation, this participation is guaranteed by the provisions of the Act on Land Consolidation and Exchange. This is consistent with the understanding of the concept of participation in legal and administrative environments [Wójcicki 2018].

The aim of the research was to analyse the role of social participation in the process of land consolidation, based on the example of two neighbouring cadastral precincts, Pogwizdów and Marcinkowice. In recent years, a consolidation procedure has been carried out in these areas. This study took into account the level of participation of residents and their opinions on the consolidation process. The study is both qualitative and quantitative, and relies on the analysis of data obtained through a survey conducted among the residents of the villages of Pogwizdów and Marcinkowice. The research tool was a questionnaire with closed questions developed for the purposes of this analysis. The questionnaire was designed in such a way as to enable respondents to evaluate the consolidation process, the held consultations, and their opinions on the entire process. The participants in the study were landowners and residents of the areas in question. The survey was conducted in paper and electronic form. In order to broaden the scope of the research, reliable and up-to-date documents, made available (in compliance with personal data protection regulations) by the Krakow Office of Geodesy and Agricultural Land in Krakow, were taken into account. These documents concerned the consolidation process and contained relevant information about the local community's participation in the consolidation process.

# 2. Definition and nature of social participation

The concept of social participation can be understood as the population's involvement in a given process. According to Hausner [1999], it means the participation of citizens in the management of the community to which they belong. It refers to involvement in public activities and cooperation between authorities and residents in order to engage

in activities for local development. This view is confirmed by Długosz and Wygnański [2005], who argue that social participation is a process in which representatives of society influence decisions regarding the management and administration of space at the local level. However, according to Nowakowska et al. [2016], this process can lead to many excitements that result from the hopes that the community places in its influence on reality.

According to Witold Sartorius [2009], most decisions concerning the space around us are made by officials or courts based on expert assessments prepared by specialists in a given field. This method of decision-making makes citizens feel that they have no real influence on what is happening in their environment. According to Hartay et al. [2023], public participation in decision-making is considered an indicator of the maturity of the population. The authors also argue that public participation is a valuable tool for improving trust in public institutions. The same authors state that public participation should be based on clear rules. Among other things, the process should have a clearly defined goal, be transparent to everyone and ensure easy access to information. Thus, in the case of land consolidation, active participation in consolidation meetings, where participants can submit their ideas and solutions for improving the development of the consolidation area, can be considered public participation. The aim of public participation is to strengthen public support for the actions of the authorities and to move away from a rigid, bureaucratic hierarchical structure. This allows us to abandon the treatment of citizens as 'customers' for whom public services should be of the highest standard, and to recognise that every citizen has an influence on what is happening around them. The contemporary approach sees social participation as one of the key principles of the decision-making process [Długosz and Wygnański 2005]. In the land consolidation process, the goals of social participation are achieved because every decision is approved by the participants in the consolidation. Farmers are given the option to raise objections to the consolidation project. During the meetings, each participant may express their opinion on a given topic. In Poland, in addition to the forms of participation specified in the Act on Land Consolidation and Exchange, additional methods of participation are suggested. Going beyond the minimum requirements specified in the Act helps increase engagement [ECNL 2016].

There are many positive features of social participation. The key when involving citizens in decision-making processes in public administration is to make the state's actions more transparent and better adapted to citizens. Getting an 'informant' who provides specialist knowledge about social expectations is beneficial for the administrative body. According to [Długosz and Wygnański 2005], through social participation, authorities gain benefits such as: effectively informing the public about their plans, better understanding citizen needs, which allows for more precise adaptation of public services, more accurate prioritisation and more effective resource management, early detection of problems, drawing up a detailed picture or profile of the problem, and obtaining a credible justification.

# 3. Social participation based on the example of the studied cadastral precincts of Pogwizdów and Marcinkowice

An analysis of the available documents from the consolidation process in Pogwizdów suggests that people willing to regulate the legal status of their properties took an active part in the proceedings. These included people willing to carry out demarcation. The chronology of events provided by the Krakow Geodetic Office reveals that the consolidation proceedings in the area under study were initiated on 11 December 2019 by a decision issued by the Miechów County Starost. None of the participants in the consolidation lodged a complaint against it. The consolidation proceedings were initiated at the request of the landowners in Pogwizdów (Fig. 1), who owned 53.60% of the area covered by the consolidation. This condition follows from the provisions of the Act on Land Consolidation and Exchange.

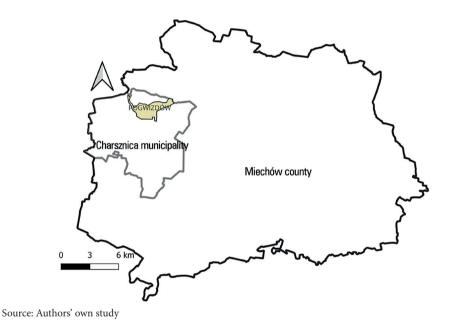


Fig. 1. Location of the Pogwizdów precinct

The Consolidation Participants' Council was elected at a meeting on 20 July 2020. The first meeting failed to secure the majority of votes needed to approve the land valuation rules. This was only possible at the second meeting, held on 24 July 2020.

On 28 September 2020, at a meeting of the consolidation participants, the results of the land valuation were announced and available for public inspection for a period of seven days at the primary school building in Pogwizdów. None of the consolidation participants raised any objections to the land valuation. The land valuation was accepted by the consolidation participants on 16 October 2020 by way of a resolution at a meet-

ing. As in the case of the approval of the land valuation rules, consent was obtained at the second meeting, as the required number of votes was not reached at the first meeting. The rules for taking possession of the land separated as a result of the consolidation were developed on 20 August 2021 with the participation of an advisory Committee that included members of the Consolidation Participants' Council. The project of land consolidation was presented to the participants of the consolidation in the field from 23 August to 1 October 2021 and on 2 November 2021. The presentation in private took place from 4 to 5 November 2021 and on 8 November 2021 in the building of the Volunteer Fire Department in Marcinkowice. All participants in the consolidation were notified in accordance with the regulations. Three objections were raised to the proposed consolidation project. The first objection concerned a change in the boundary between plots with working numbers 126/1 and 251/3. The objection was considered by the supervisory authority, which found that the boundary between the plots was disputed. The participant in the consolidation who raised the objection submitted a statement expressing his desire to preserve the boundary between the disputed plots, as he claimed that the boundary had existed there for about 50 years. After reviewing the surveying and legal materials, the starost (county administrator) ordered a demarcation procedure for the disputed properties. The second objection to the project concerned the allocation of an equivalent in the form of the entire section of the municipal road adjacent to plot 473 and the related felling of trees planted on this road by one of the village residents. After obtaining the opinion of the advisory Committee and the contractor for the consolidation works, the starost commissioned a survey of the trees located on plot 466 and the preparation of a map indicating their location in relation to the plot boundaries. The objection was raised due to an attempt to widen the access road to plots 467, 468, 469 and 470, which, according to the Commission, with a width of 3.00 m, was not suitable for agricultural vehicles or refuse collection vehicles. The widening was not possible without encroaching on plots with working numbers 75/ and 75/2, which caused a neighbour dispute, as the owner of these plots considered that 3.00 m was sufficient for access. The starost ruled against the objection, agreeing with the solution proposed by the advisory Committee, which entailed cutting down trees.

The third objection concerned a change in the boundaries of plots 623 and 621/2 in order to enable the construction of a car park next to the parish cemetery. This objection was approved by the advisory Committee. However, it added a change to the objection proposed by the participant. It consisted in transferring part of the land belonging to the Parish to the Municipality of Charsznica for an appropriate fee for plot number 621/1, on which a road connecting the church with the cemetery will be located. This solution ensured access to plot no. 621/2. As a result of these actions, plot no. 623 was reduced on the north side and enlarged on the west side at the expense of plot no. 621/1. On 31 August 2022 the Starost of Miechów, in accordance with the law, informed the participants of the consolidation about the possibility of reviewing the entire case file, including the right to comment on the evidence and materials collected, between 22 and 30 August 2022. None of the participants in the land consolidation made use of this right. During the demarcation proceedings of plot no. 356/2 with plot no. 356/1 and, at

a single point, with plots nos. 727 and 728, despite proper notification, the representative of the Charsznica Municipality, as the owner of plots 727 and 728, did not participate in the proceedings. The parties could not be persuaded to reach a settlement during the proceedings, and therefore the course of the boundaries was not determined. After analysing the materials, the authorised surveyor conducting the demarcation decided on the correctness of the boundary line, even though the existing boundary on the ground does not correspond to the results of the analysis of the materials.

The second examined precinct was the village of Marcinkowice. Consolidation works for this precinct (Fig. 2) were initiated by the Miechów Starost on 15 October 2018, who issued a decision to initiate proceedings. None of the participants in the consolidation lodged a complaint against the decision. The consolidation proceedings were initiated at the request of the owners of 55.26% of the land in the entire area, which met the criterion specified in the Act on Land Consolidation and Exchange.

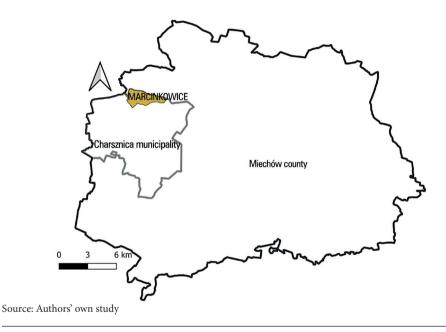


Fig. 2. Location of the Marcinkowice precinct

On 19 November 2018, the Consolidation Participants' Council was elected. The participants were notified of the date of the meeting in accordance with the regulations. On 13 March 2020, at the second meeting, a resolution on determining the terms of land valuation was passed, which was not possible during the first meeting on 12 March 2020 due to the lack of the majority of votes required by law. The participants of the consolidation were notified of the dates of the meetings in accordance with the regulations. At the meeting on 20 August 2020, the results of the land valuation were presented and then made available for public inspection on 21 August 2020, 24 August 2020 – 28 August

2020 and on 31 August 2002. The participants did not raise any objections to the land valuation. The participants expressed their consent to the valuation in a resolution on 8 September 2020 at a meeting held on the second date, as an insufficient number of votes were obtained at the meeting held on the first date, i.e. 7 September 2020.

Requests were collected from the participants of the consolidation between 20 January and 17 February 2021. According to the surveyor's report, courtesy of the Krakow Office of Surveying and Agricultural Land in Krakow, 45% of the consolidation participants took part in the collection of requests. Personally, 28.8% of the consolidation participants submitted their requests, 8.5% through a representative, and 4.2% by telephone. On 23 June 2021, the rules and deadlines for taking possession of the demarcated land were drawn up with the participation of the Consolidation Committee, which consisted of members of the Consolidation Participants' Council. The land consolidation project was presented to the participants in the field from 24 June to 30 September 2021. In accordance with the surveyor's report after the land consolidation project had been designated and presented, courtesy of the Krakow Office of Geodesy and Agricultural Land in Krakow, 56% of the consolidation participants took part in the presentation on the ground, either in person or through a representative. It was presented in a small group on 1-5 October 2021 in the building of the Volunteer Fire Department in Marcinkowice, which, according to the report, was reviewed in person or through a representative by 10% of the consolidation participants. One objection was raised to the presented project. Polskie Koleje Państwowe SA (Polish State Railways), as a participant in the consolidation, raised an objection referring to the correction of the boundary between plot no. 852/1 and plot no. 853/3 so that the signal box building would be located entirely on plot 852/1. PKP S.A. also requested the consolidation of registered plots 849/1, 849/2, 850/1 and plots 856/1, 857/5, 869/3 and 550/5. Another request in the reservation was the division of plot 947/1. The remaining plots belonging to Polskie Koleje Państwowe SA. located in the area subject to consolidation were to remain unchanged. In addition, in a supplement to the objection in an e-mail, PKP SA requested the division of plot 947/1 with payment of cash for the separated parts on which there is no railway infrastructure. After reviewing the opinion of the advisory committee, the Miechów Starost decided that the request was unfounded.

# 4. The results of the research

In order to examine the actual role of public participation in the land consolidation process, a survey was conducted using a questionnaire as a research tool. This allowed for obtaining direct opinions of the residents of the surveyed areas on the purpose and effects of the consolidation works. The questionnaire enabled the collection of data to evaluate the level of involvement in the consolidation process and to assess the effects of consolidation by the owners and residents of the consolidated villages.

The questionnaire contained closed questions, allowing for standardisation of responses and making it easier to analyse the results. The questions were formulated in

such a way so that they could be easily understood. The questionnaire was conducted in both paper and electronic form, giving access to a wider group of respondents. The results were then entered into a spreadsheet for further analysis.

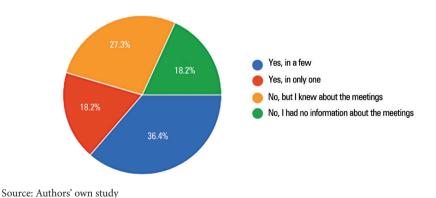
The questionnaire addressed to the residents of Pogwizdów and Marcinkowice precincts contained seven closed questions. The questions concerned the consolidation process and the participation of residents in its various stages. It also helped to understand the landowners' point of view on and assessment of the consolidation process. The questionnaire was sent to some residents via social media. Those without social media accounts received a paper version of the questionnaire. A total of 150 questionnaires were provided, but only 42 responses were received.

The questions and possible answers concerned the following issues:

| 1. | Were you informed about the commencement of the land consolidation process?                 |
|----|---|
|    | ☐ Yes, in due time  |
|    | ☐ Yes, but too late   |
|    | □ No, I found out by chance   |
|    | □ No, I did not know at all   |
| 2. | How would you rate the possibility of expressing your opinion in the consolidation process? |
|    | □ Very good – I was able to freely express my opinion                                       |
|    | ☐ Good – to a limited extent  |
|    | □ Poor – I had difficulties with participation  |
|    | □ No possibility – there was no space for residents to express their opinions               |
| 3. | How much trust did you have in the institution handling the consolidation?                  |
|    | ☐ High – the process was transparent and trustworthy  |
|    | ☐ Moderate – there were some doubts   |
|    | □ Low – there was a lack of transparency  |
|    | □ No trust – I felt ignored   |
| 4. | Do you think that the opinions of residents had a real influence on the final decisions?    |
|    | ☐ Yes, to a large extent  |
|    | ☐ To some extent  |
|    | ☐ To a small extent   |
|    | □ No, they had no influence   |
|    | ☐ I have no opinion   |
| 5. | Were you able to ask questions and get answers from those conducting the process?           |
|    | ☐ Yes, in person during meetings  |
|    | ☐ Yes, by telephone or e-mail   |
|    |   |

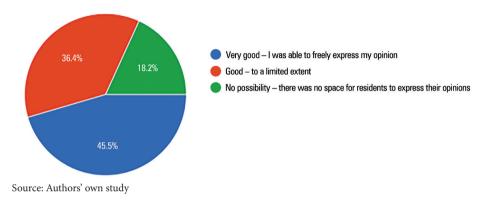
□ No, I tried, but without success ☐ I did not need to ask any questions □ I did not know who to ask 6. Did you feel that the decision-makers listened to you during the process? □ Definitely yes □ Probably yes □ Probably no □ Definitely no □ I did not actively participate 7. Would you like to participate in similar processes in the future (e.g. spatial planning, municipal consultations)? ☐ Yes, definitely ☐ Yes, if the process is better organised □ Probably not □ Definitely not □ I don't know

The first question, 'Did you participate in informational meetings or consultations concerning the consolidation?' verified the degree of interest (involvement) of the residents of the studied villages through their numerical participation in meetings organised by the body conducting the consolidation. It turns out that only 36.4% of respondents participated in a few meetings. Whereas 18.2% took part in only one meeting. The survey found that 45.5% of residents did not participate in these meetings at all, although 27.3% knew about the meetings. The remaining 18.2% of respondents said they had no information about the meetings (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3.** Illustration of respondent answers to question 1 of the questionnaire: 'Did you participate in informational meetings or consultations concerning the consolidation?'

The second question asked how the consolidation process was assessed by its participants. The question was: 'How would you rate the possibility of expressing your opinion in the consolidation process?' Almost half of the respondents, as many as 45.5% of residents, stated that they were able to freely express their opinion. According to 36.4% of respondents, expressing their opinion was possible to a limited extent. The remaining 18.2% of respondents stated that they were unable to express their opinion during the consolidation process (Fig. 4) .



**Fig. 4.** Illustration of respondent answers to question 2 of the questionnaire: 'How would you rate the possibility of expressing your opinion in the consolidation process?'

The next question, 'How much trust did you have in the institution handling the consolidation?', was intended to assess the community's trust in the authorities conducting the consolidation. As it turned out, 36.4% of respondents showed a high degree of trust. The same number of responses was given for the answer indicating that there were some doubts about the institution conducting the consolidation. Meanwhile, 27.3% of respondents did not trust the institution and felt left out of the process (Fig. 5).

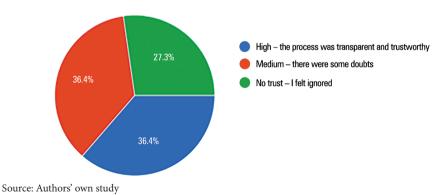
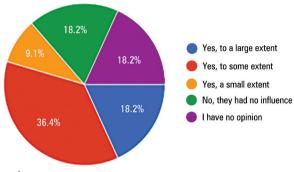


Fig. 5. Illustration of respondent answers to question 3 of the questionnaire: 'How much trust did you have in the institution handling the consolidation?'

The aim of the fourth question was to find out whether residents believed that their opinions had an influence on the decisions. In this regard, only 18.2% of respondents felt that their opinion affected the decision-making process to a considerable degree. A further 36.4% of respondents said that they had influenced the decisions to some extent, while 9.1% believed that their opinions had had little importance. According to 18.2% of the participants, their opinions were not taken into account. The remaining 18.2% of respondents had no opinion on this subject (Fig. 6).



Source: Authors' own study

Fig. 6. Illustration of respondent answers to question 4 of the questionnaire: 'Do you believe that your opinions had an influence on the decisions?'

The next question, 'Were you able to ask questions and get answers from those conducting the process?', asked residents how they assessed their contact with the handlers of the process, whom they could talk to in case of doubts. In this regard, 54.5% of respondents said that they had such an opportunity in person during meetings. 9.1% of respondents contacted them by telephone. The same proportion of participants stated that they did not know who to turn to. Menawhile 27.3% of respondents did not feel the need to ask any questions (Fig. 7).

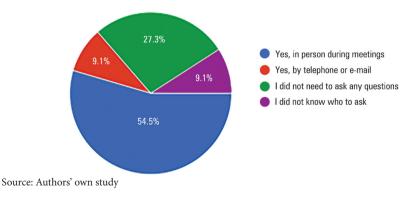
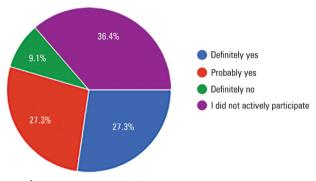


Fig. 7. Illustration of respondent answers to question 5 of the questionnaire: 'Were you able to ask questions and get answers from those conducting the process?'

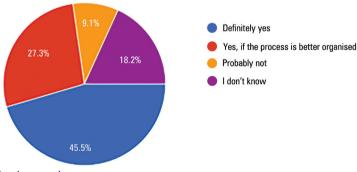
The sixth question checked whether the respondents felt that they had been listened to by decision-makers. 27.3% of respondents definitively felt listened to. Another 27.3% thought they were listened to, but maybe not as much as they wanted. 9.1% of respondents said they weren't listened to, and the remaining 36.4% stated that they didn't actively participate in the consolidation process (Fig. 8).



Source: Authors' own study

Fig. 8. Illustration of respondent answers to question 6 of the questionnaire: 'Did you feel that you had been listened to by decision-makers?'

The penultimate question examined the willingness of the respondents to participate in processes such as spatial planning or consultations with local authorities on decision-making. Here, as many as 45.5% of the respondents expressed a strong willingness to be involved in such processes. Meanwhile, 27.3% of respondents said they would participate in similar processes if they were better organised. Over 9% of participants did not express a willingness to participate, and the remaining 18.2% of respondents were undecided (Fig. 9).



Source: Authors' own study

Fig. 9. Illustration of respondent answers to question 7 of the questionnaire: 'Would you like to participate in similar processes in the future (e.g., spatial planning, municipal consultations)?

### 5. Discussion

Analysing documents on land consolidation in the cadastral precincts of Pogwizdów and Marcinkowice, it can be concluded that participants in the consolidation who owned land in Pogwizdów were more willing to attend meetings and raise their concerns about the conducted proceedings. A satisfactory turnout at meetings and the level of activity of residents during and after the consolidation process prove this. In the case of Marcinkowice, 45% of the consolidation participants took part in the meeting during which requests were collected, and 56% of the consolidation participants were present when the project was presented in the field. Unfortunately, it was not possible to collect similar documents for the Pogwizdów precinct.

The response rate to the survey can be regarded as unsatisfactory. The survey conducted among residents of the precincts is an example of how reluctant the local community is to participate in social research. Despite sending or personally delivering the questionnaire to most residents (approximately 150 questionnaires were provided), the results were collected from only a small group of 42 people. Some residents, particularly those in the Marcinkowice precinct, did not even bother to read the questions.

The results obtained from the questionnaire tell us that residents of these precincts participated fully in the consolidation process only to a moderate degree. The level of involvement in creating their reality depended on their individual attitude to this issue. There were people who were very committed to improving the living conditions in their village, but in the overall assessment of such involvement, they constituted a minority. Noteworthy is the 27.3% score for the question 'How much trust did you have in the institution handling the consolidation?' The most common answers indicated the option: 'No trust - I felt ignored.' This result is very surprising, as it illustrates the lack of public trust in the institution responsible for works supervised by the starost. Perhaps this result was generated by the responses of people who submitted their ideas or complaints but were not taken into account. In turn, a high percentage of respondents (63%) believe that residents' opinions had a minimal impact on the decisions. This seems to be a step in the right direction, showing a high level of satisfaction among the population with the fact that their opinions were considered important and had some value. The response to the last question about willingness to participate in similar processes, in which the community determines what will change in their environment, can also be assessed positively. The result of 72.8% shows that residents want to participate in shaping the local environment in the future. It is worth quoting here the comment made by one of the farmers, who stated that greater involvement of the local community is needed. He gave his own example as the owner of a plot of agricultural land along the border, which was crossed by a dirt road (unpaved). The owners of the land on the other side of the road gradually moved the road towards his property year after year by ploughing part of the road. When the consolidation project was presented in the field, only the affected farmer was present. After the harvest, the farmer decided to plough part of the road that was within the boundaries of his land and sowed wheat on it. After two weeks, while inspecting his fields, he noticed that despite ploughing his

property, vehicles were still driving across his land, destroying his crops. The affected farmer hired an excavator and dug a ditch along the border with the newly designated road (Fig. 10). It turned out that the owners of the plots using the road only became interested in the problem when part of their property was actually taken away from them, and they were surprised by this solution. The farmer in question commented on this by writing in the survey: 'They could have attended the meetings, then they would have known.'



Source: private archive of one of the farmers

Fig. 10. Ditch on the border between the plot and the road

### 6. Conclusions

An analysis of the subject literature, legal regulations, sample technical documentation from the consolidation process in selected precincts, as well as questionnaires reflecting the opinions of the residents of the villages undergoing consolidation, showed that the consolidation process plays a very important role in improving the spatial structure of villages, and significantly contributes to bettering the quality of life of their residents.

The survey revealed that the residents of the villages of Marcinkowice and Pogwizdów who participated in public consultations prior to the consolidation works were more satisfied with the results of the consolidation process than those who did not participate. This indicates a correlation between public participation and a positive perception of administrative actions.

Despite the easily accessible forms of consultation during the consolidation process, some residents limited themselves to passive participation or did not engage in any way. This indicates that public participation was mainly passive, as those residents did not submit any comments. However, there was a significant proportion of landowners in the studied villages who, in order to achieve their goals (benefits of consolidation), actively participated in meetings and submitted their suggestions. It seems that such a social attitude may influence the behaviour of this passive group of consolidation participants in the future. Thanks to the active attitude of the group of village residents, the more passive group was able to see after the consolidation process that by being socially involved, they could also achieve something for themselves.

An analysis of sample consolidation documents confirmed the exercise of public participation as required by law under the Act of 26 March 1982 on land consolidation and exchange. These provisions impose an obligation on the authorities conducting consolidation works to inform participants about the course of the process and to organise meetings at which residents can submit their comments on the documents presented. Formal compliance with information obligations did not always translate into actual involvement of the local community, as exemplified by meetings at which the required number of participants was not reached on the first date.

The study confirms that public participation in the process of land consolidation has a major influence on public satisfaction after its completion. Yet, the case study shows that, unfortunately, not all participants in the consolidation process recognise the importance of being involved in such processes.

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