

## Article

# Overcoming Socio-Economic Problems in Crisis Areas through Revitalization of Cittaslow Towns. Evidence from North-East Poland

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**Abstract:** The revitalization of small towns is connected with an attempt to find multidirectional solutions to numerous social, economic and spatial problems. It is possible to remove degraded areas and areas with a high risk of social exclusion through coordinated and skillfully planned activities consisting of corrective interventions within these areas and, indirectly, in the whole structure of a small town. There are many studies on improving the quality of life of inhabitants at risk of exclusion in large cities. At the same time, there is a gap in the analyses of this phenomenon in small towns. In this article, we present the results of our observations on changes in the quality and living conditions of residents as a result of social projects implemented as part of the revitalization of marginalized areas in cities associated with the Cittaslow movement. The starting point is to identify the main socioeconomic problems and relate them to the effects of the revitalization activities carried out under the Supralocal Revitalization Program (SLRP). The study analyzed all projects that were a response to social problems in fourteen cities in the Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship (Poland). It was based on a quantitative assessment of the selected socioeconomic indicators and a qualitative assessment based on interviews with local experts. The results of the research indicate a reduction in unemployment in all the cities covered by the study. On the other hand, the results of the expert interview show that it is not directly influenced by the implemented revitalization projects. According to experts, after revitalization, the crime rate decreased insignificantly and the educational and professional involvement of residents from marginalized areas is still low. The results may give rise to the creation of scenarios to deal with the socioeconomic problems of the analyzed examples and recommendations for the revitalization of other Cittaslow towns in the region as well as small towns in Europe and the world.

**Keywords:** revitalization; small town networks; Cittaslow; socioeconomic problems



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## 1. Introduction

The process of revitalization of small towns should include multi-directional, coordinated and comprehensive activities in the entire area of these cities, but above all in the so-called economically [1], spatially [2,3] and socially [4] marginalized areas. In the case of large European cities, this process was started much earlier and often results from problems perceived on a global scale, while in small cities, some system and program solutions were adopted relatively recently [5–7]. It is in the smallest units, especially those located on the periphery, that social problems, just behind economic problems, are the main “slowdown” of regional development.

One of the assumptions of the revitalization of small towns is to improve the standard of living of residents, including socially excluded people, the unemployed or those at risk of poverty. Improving the quality of life is related to ensuring safety, good housing conditions, increasing social activity and social integration, which directly relates to the reconstruction of social ties. Concerning the revitalization process, it often covers neglected areas, but with high cultural values and evidence of heritage. The revitalization of such spaces may contribute to an increase in the sense of belonging and pride of a given community, and this, consequently, may have transposition into increasing order in marginalized areas and improving living conditions. On the other hand, the restoration of heritage sites can generate additional sources of income and lay the foundations for the development of small-town tourism. Nevertheless, the main task of revitalization is to increase the quality and reduce the social and economic problems of small towns. Importantly, measures to raise the standard of living should be coordinated with systemic assistance in finding a job, increasing opportunities on the labour market, access to education and remedial programs for families struggling with violence or alcohol-related problems.

The main goal of social revitalization is to renew the social potential so that the local community is integrated into the wider environment. This is done by activating its internal resources and potentials. It should be noted that the subject of social revitalization is the local community and the various groups within it. The characteristic elements of such revitalizations include information policy, panels, workshops, the activities of municipal movements and the effects of such revitalization (activities of schools, theatres, activity centres, companies or new jobs). The assessment of the process of social revitalization can be measured, for example, using indicators of social inclusion or exclusion or by the perceived level of exclusion [8].

The issues of socioeconomic problems of small towns in the Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship should, on the one hand, be considered in many directions and related to the global situation. On the other hand, attention should be paid to the specificity of the region. In this second context, the problems stem in part from the low competitiveness and location of large cities. Cities in the region are located in the peripheral system, in areas with underdeveloped infrastructure and underinvestment [9]. Historical factors also overlap, especially the situation after the transformation in 1989. In a region where agriculture was the main function and servicing agriculture in the system of former state-owned farms, many inhabitants of rural areas, but also small towns and their surroundings, lost their employment and thus their main source of income. Most of them did not find their place in the new political and economic system, and the growing problem affected subsequent generations [10]. Long-term unemployment of a significant number of the region's inhabitants, including those of small towns, increased poverty and social exclusion. This, in turn, generated other negative social phenomena related to low economic activity, poor education and preparation for new professional activities or, in extreme cases, the intensity of pathology or domestic violence. Problems related to upbringing, child and youth care and education also intensified. A partial response to these problems in small local communities was to be the actions defined in local revitalization programs. Most of these documents were created after the act on revitalization was passed [11], while in 2015, the first document was created which is a continuation of comprehensive and integrated revitalization activities in small cities concentrated in the Cittaslow movement, i.e., SLRP [12].

The research presented in this article is a continuation of a broader look at effectiveness of the implemented revitalization activities and the benefits of Cittaslow city revitalization programs. Our previous research focused on the issues of changes in public spaces [2] and sustainable transport [13]. The research aimed to define the role of the revitalization program in the socioeconomic development of Cittaslow towns in the Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship (Poland).

The analyses were conducted to answer the following main questions:

- Has the membership in the Cittaslow city network and the inclusion of cities in the Supralocal Revitalization Program (SLRP) increased the attractiveness of cities as places for “good and decent living”?
- To what extent are projects implemented under the SLRP directly related to one of the main goals of Cittaslow cities, i.e., improving the quality of life of residents, especially those at risk of social exclusion?
- Are there any visible changes in the activation of occupations of residents after the revitalization?
- To what extent have SLRP projects contributed to reducing unemployment and poverty?
- Has the implementation of regeneration projects contributed to increasing the level of participation in the public and cultural life of people at risk of social exclusion?
- Additionally, the authors tried to answer an additional question:
- Is the participation of cities in SLRP related to the increase in the number of projects based on social development and their effectiveness?

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 includes literature review; Section 3 describes methods that were applied in the research and the materials that were used to perform the analyses; Section 4 contains results of the research; and the discussion and conclusions of the obtained results are presented in Sections 5 and 6.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Socioeconomic Crisis in Small Towns Located on the Periphery

Socioeconomic problems in small towns are related to ongoing global economic, demographic and functional changes. They are the result of many processes taking place in the economy and society of the modern world [14]. In addition to conditions on a global scale, internal political and sociocultural conditions are also important. The most noticeable problems related to the changes concern mainly the small towns located in the zones of influence of large urban centres or located on the periphery [15,16]. In the latter case, one can observe the degradation of structures with poor investment opportunities in terms of acquiring employers and establishing new companies but also underinvested in terms of infrastructure and the quality of life of residents. These cities struggle with the problem of high unemployment, which is partly due to the lack of job offers in the labour market, and on the other hand, to the poor professional preparation of potential employees. According to Kotus [17], over 60% of the Polish population lives in cities and is functionally related to urban organizations. Therefore, the identification of the problems and development prospects of Polish cities is one of the most important factors in improving the lives of a large part of society. Examples of places where poverty, spreading pathology and neglect in terms of infrastructure and housing are noticed can be found in most small Polish cities [18], but not exclusively. Problems in social, economic and environmental development occur in various regions of Europe and the world [19–26].

One of the most noticed problems in small peripheral towns is high unemployment [10]. The phenomenon of unemployment translates directly and indirectly into material issues, such as financial problems and poverty, as well as negative effects for the whole community by the high cost of social benefits. This is also overlapped by social isolation resulting from the lack of ideas to spend free time and stigmatization of the rest of society. Unemployment contributes to increasing social pathology, addictions and crime. Moreover, these phenomena often affect entire families, not only individuals [25]. These problems also generate a deterioration of the mental state, a general aversion to life and apathy, which only intensifies further social exclusion.

The causes of unfavourable social phenomena in small towns can also be found in demographic changes, including the ageing of the society, the migration of young, especially educated people, to large cities, lack of access to higher-level culture and education and the lack of connection with cultural heritage and local and regional history. Additionally, with the negative effects of such phenomena as demographic (the elderly, large families), and the deterioration of the quality of life in small towns, one may combine poor access to

medical services or the inability to seek the help of a specialist. Other factors related to the space of small towns are the poor development of the residential, technical and communication infrastructures, as well as the low quality of the environment. It is connected with the degradation and devastation of public and private space as well as the deterioration of the landscape.

According to Heffner and Twardzik [27], in the face of socioeconomic challenges, small towns try to redefine their role and place in the spatial structure of the region, looking for new impulses of development and a chance to improve the living conditions of the community. The processes and changes relating to the progressing globalization, demography, social problems and increasing competition of large cities mobilize to seek new concepts or modify traditional concepts for the development of small towns. One of the modes of sustainable development is city renewal and the revitalization process.

## *2.2. Revitalization Policy of Small Towns in Poland*

The need for urban regeneration arose in the United States, wherein, in the 1950s, joint actions of the administration and the private sector were introduced aimed at the economic revival of degraded neighborhoods. The first comprehensive revitalization activities in Poland were preceded by numerous experiences related to the revalorization, adaptation and conservation of the existing historic tissue. Planning measures to relaunch as a revitalization to improve the situation of the area started in the 1990s [28]. However, the year 2004 is assumed to be the beginning of the systemic implementation of revitalization understood as an integrated approach towards solving problems occurring in given crisis areas of Polish cities. After Poland acceded to the European Union, successive operational programs, implemented by marshal offices, almost in every case provided financial resources for the revitalization of cities. Thanks to the funds from the Regional Development Operational Program in the years 2004–2013, the planning of the Local Revitalisation Programs was started.

The turning point was 2015 when, after more than 10 years of implementation of revitalization projects co-financed from EU funds in Poland, the Act of Revitalisation from 9 October 2015, was adopted [11]. This document, together with the Act on Spatial Planning and Development of 27 March 2003, is currently of decisive importance in Poland for the process of restoration of degraded areas.

European funds are also very important in the revitalization process in Poland. They are the basic source of financing for regeneration programs and projects. The basis of the EU cohesion policy is the document: Europe 2020. A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, on the basis of which the member states define their strategy documents. In Poland, the document constituting the basis for spending European funds is the Partnership Agreement, which defines the directions of intervention for 2014 to 2020. Operational programs—national and regional, as well as guidelines formulated at the level of the ministry and marshal offices—are of fundamental importance for revitalization. In the discussed region, the key document under which revitalization projects co-financed from European funds are currently implemented is the Regional Operational Program of the Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodship 2014–2020.

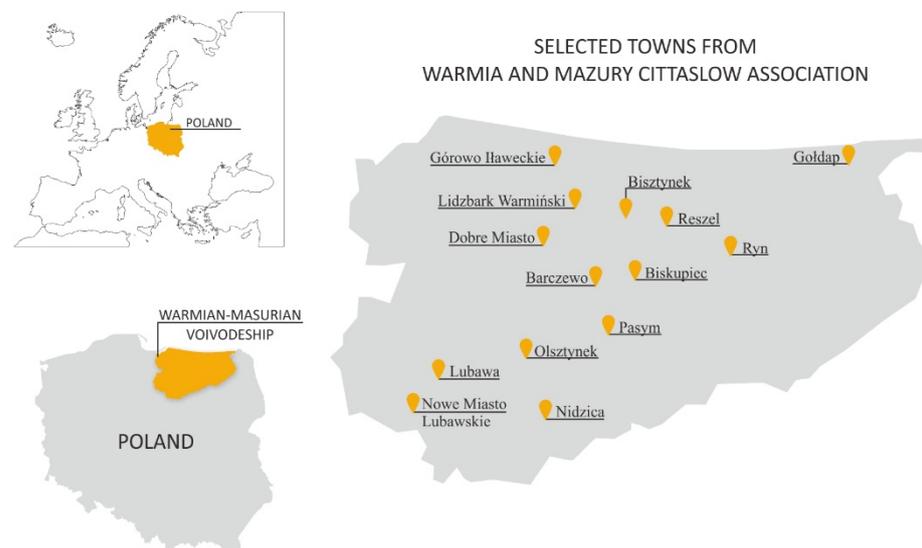
The local level is of key importance for regeneration projects. It should be emphasized, however, that all of the above-mentioned documents are clear indications in terms of programming the renewal of degraded areas in cities and municipalities. The basis for formulating the revitalization policy at the local level are revitalization programs for which the guidelines are set out in the Revitalization Act, EU documents, and the National Revitalization Plan, and indirectly, also in other documents shaping the socioeconomic development of the country. The analyzed region is the only one in Poland that has a dedicated Supralocal Revitalization Program of the cities of the Cittaslow network, which is a framework document with operational elements, having its basis in specific Local Revitalization Programs. It is a peculiar novelty not only on a national scale but also throughout Europe.

Planning issues are specified in local revitalization plans, local spatial development plans as well as in the study of the conditions and directions of spatial development. The legal basis for these studies is the Act on spatial planning and development. The regulations are also included in the Concept of National Spatial Development. It is worth emphasizing that the model of revitalization policy implemented in the region of Warmia and Mazury is a novelty on a European and global scale. Among all the member cities of the Cittaslow network in the world, which, according to the data at the end of June 2021, there were 278, only in one case can we talk about the implementation of a separate Revitalization Program for the Cittaslow Network (SLRP), and it concerned “Polish Cittaslow Towns” from the Warmia and Mazury region. Nowhere else is there such a comprehensive study of social and economic development priorities for small towns. In various regions of Europe and the world, regeneration projects concern only individual cases of small towns, taking into account their specificity but not responding to the problems that are usually characteristic of similar cities in the region and are related. For example, unemployment concerning SLRP in the region of Warmia and Mazury is not considered in points but rather in areas, similar to the issues of poverty and education.

### 3. Materials and Methods

#### 3.1. The Study Area

Fourteen towns from northeastern Poland in the Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship were selected for the study (Figure 1). They are associated in Polish Cittaslow Towns Movement and joined the SLRP in 2015 [12]. These are: Barczewo, Biskupiec, Bisztynek, Dobre Miasto, Gołdap, Górowo Iławeckie, Lidzbark Warmiński, Lubawa, Nidzica, Nowe Miasto Lubawskie, Olsztynek, Pasym, Reszel and Ryn.



**Figure 1.** Location of fourteen selected Cittaslow Towns (Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship, Poland).

#### 3.2. Research Stages and Methods

The research was divided into three stages. In the first, the literature on the subject as well as monographic and cartographic documents concerning the towns of Cittaslow were studied. In the second stage, a diagnosis of the socioeconomic situation in 14 Cittaslow cities was made based on secondary data from the Local Data Bank of the Central Statistical Office (GUS) [29]. The third stage concerned the evaluation of projects by a group of experts. The conducted research covers the period from the beginning of 2015 to December 2020. An interview with experts was conducted in the second half of 2020.

### 3.2.1. Stage I. Analysis of Materials and Documents Related to Selected Towns

In the first stage, individual revitalization programs of all analyzed cities from 2014–2020 were analyzed, and then they were compared with the first version of SLRP from 2015. The main goal of this stage was to diagnose social and economic problems as well as the assumptions and foundations of the prepared revitalization projects. After initial verification, the most important problems were selected and grouped into the following groups: unemployment, poverty, crime, domestic violence, care and upbringing problems, alcoholism, low level of education and vocational preparation, low level of social capital and low level of participation in public and cultural life. On the other hand, reference was made to the assumptions in the SLPR regarding the improvement of the socioeconomic situation in selected cities. On this basis, the main directions and goals of the prepared program were selected and described.

### 3.2.2. Stage II. Diagnosis of Socioeconomic Indicators and Revitalization Projects Related to Selected Towns

To identify crisis states in the analyzed cities of the Cittaslow network, secondary data was collected and analyzed related to negative social phenomena such as unemployment, demographic problems, poverty, crime and low level of entrepreneurship. The authors used the statistical database of the Central Statistical Office and collected the most current indicators available at the time of writing the publication (for 2019) regarding demography, labour market, entities of the national economy according to REGON register, reasons for using social assistance and the level and nature of the crime. In the next step, the authors analyzed revitalization projects co-financed by European funds for 2014 to 2020. Revitalization investments influencing the elimination of socioeconomic problems in the analyzed cities include all investment and social undertakings whose product indicators related to: (1) the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion covered by the support under the program; (2) the number of people using revitalized areas/supported infrastructure; (3) the thermal modernization of revitalized buildings. Taking into account the value of regeneration projects per capita, city class divisions were made to check whether financial resources are directed in particular to those units that struggle with the high level of socio-economic problems. In determining the class boundaries between individual cities, the following equal span method was used [30]:

$$C = \frac{x_N - x_1}{k}$$

where:  $x_N$ —highest value in the set,  $x_1$ —lowest value in the set,  $k$ —number of classes and  $N$ —number of primary fields.

Subsequent boundary values were calculated from the formula:

$$D_{j+1} = D_j + C$$

where:  $D_j$ —lower limit of  $j$ th class and  $D_{j+1}$ —lower limit of a class 1 higher than the  $j$ th class.

Under the assumption that:

$$G_j = D_{j+1}$$

$$D_1 = x_1 \text{ i } G_N = x_N$$

After calculating the values of class boundaries, the number of occurrences of cities in a given class was counted. Then, the Tabular Accuracy Index (TAI) was calculated according to the formula:

$$TAI = 1 - \frac{\sum_{j=1}^k \sum_{i=1}^{N_j} |x_{ij} - \bar{x}_j|}{\sum_{i=1}^N |x_i - \bar{x}|}$$

where:

$\bar{x}$  – arithmetic mean of all values,

$\bar{x}_j$  – arithmetic mean of the values in  $j$  – th class

### 3.2.3. Stage III. Interview with Experts

The aim of the expert interview was to get acquainted with the opinion on the role of SLRP projects in social development and reducing social problems in all cities selected for the study. The authors interviewed 21 experts (15 women, 6 men). Experts represented various fields related to, among others, pro-social activities for the excluded, education of children and youth, vocational education of adults, social animation and social integration. At this stage, people related to and directly involved in the implementation of the SLRP projects were excluded, which allowed for obtaining reliable answers. In the next step, the authors specified the following key criteria when selecting experts:

- knowledge of the revitalization process in small towns in the Warmińsko-Mazurskie voivodship;
- the ability to expertly assess social changes in fourteen cities selected for the analysis;
- the ability to identify and assess phenomena related to the quality of life, including social exclusion, unemployment, poverty, addictions, professional activation, education of the society and social integration.

Experts gave their opinion on the advisability of revitalization projects and their possible impact on improving the quality of life and reducing the main social problems. The interview protocol included ten issues grouped into two blocks: a descriptive opinion on the SLRP and questions regarding guidelines for the development of programs and the implementation of projects in the future.

The issues in the interview concerned:

- the degree of increasing the attractiveness of cities as places for “good and dignified life”;
- the main motivation of Cittaslow cities concerning the commencement of social revitalization in small towns;
- the links between the goals contained in social projects and the main goals contained in the assumptions of the development of cities in the Cittaslow network;
- the impact of the implementation of social projects on reducing unemployment and poverty;
- the degree of increasing the number, quality and effectiveness of pro-social projects, including activation of residents and educational activities;
- the degree of reduction of problems related to alcoholism and drug addiction;
- the degree of reduction in the risk of crime.

The respondents were acquainted with the purpose of the interview and informed about the research assumptions. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the interviews were conducted online.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Diagnosis of Problems (Division into Main Groups, Evaluation by City). The Spatial Scope of the Impact of Revitalization Activities

According to the guidelines on revitalization under the Polish EU cohesion policy for 2014–2020, revitalization can only be carried out in a degraded area or in a crisis state due to the concentration of negative social phenomena (in particular, unemployment, poverty, crime, low level of education or social capital, as well as an insufficient level of participation in public and cultural life) [12]. A supplementary condition for joining the SLRP 2015 program was the diagnosis of at least one phenomenon from the following groups in the area covered by revitalization:

- Economic (e.g., low level of entrepreneurship);
- Technical (e.g., poor condition of infrastructure and buildings);

- Environmental (e.g., bad quality of the environment);
- Spatial and functional (poor access to services and communication, poor planning and urbanization solutions, no use of historical objects/lack of renovation of cultural objects in marginalized areas).

The problems highlighted in both Local Revitalization Programs of selected cities and SLRP are presented in Table 1. Due to the research methodology, the presented results of the analysis of the main problems cover only issues related to social projects.

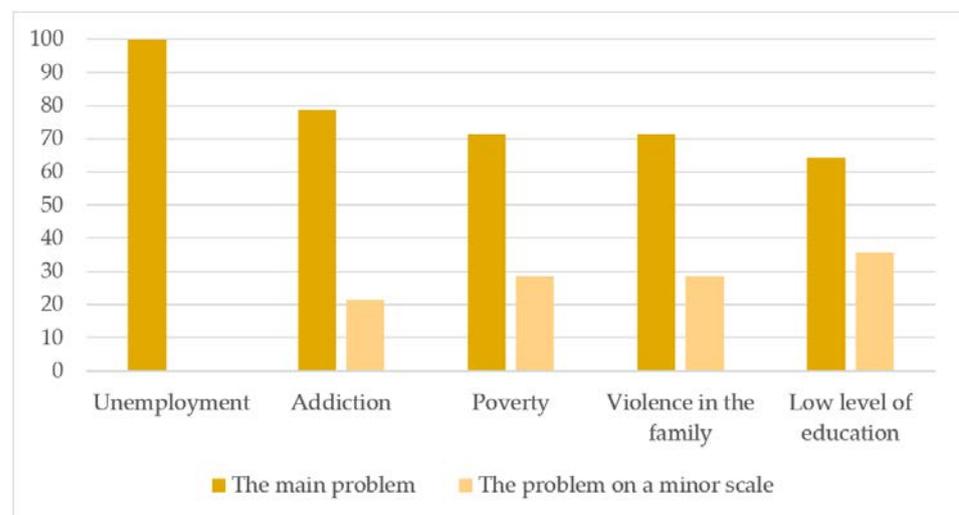
**Table 1.** Main socioeconomic problems in selected Cittaslow Towns (own elaboration based on SLRP, 2015).

Town	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Barczewo	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	-	-	-
Biskupiec	x	x	-	x	x	-	x	-	-	-
Bisztynek	x	x	-	x	x	x	-	x	-	x
Dobre Miasto	x	x	-	x	x	x	-	x	-	-
Gołdap	x	-	x	x	x	x	-	-	-	-
Górowo Iławeckie	x	x	-	x	x	x	x	-	-	x
Lidzbark Warm.	x	x	x	-	-	x	x	x	x	-
Lubawa	x	x	-	-	x	x	-	-	-	-
Nidzica	x	x	x	x	-	-	-	x	-	-
N. M. Lubawskie	x	x	-	-	-	-	x	x	-	x
Olsztynek	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	-
Pasym	x	-	x	x	-	x	x	-	-	x
Reszel	x	-	x	x	-	x	x	-	-	-
Ryn	x	-	-	-	-	x	x	x	x	-
Total	14	10	7	10	8	11	9	7	3	4

1. Unemployment, 2. Poverty, 3. Crime, 4. Domestic violence, 5. Care and educational problems, 6. Alcoholism, 7. Low level of education and vocational preparation, 8. Low level of social capital, 9. Low level of participation in public and cultural life, 10. Abandonment of cultural/heritage facilities/no use of valuable infrastructure.

As the analysis shows, the most frequently diagnosed social problems concern:

- High unemployment (14 towns)
- Alcohol addiction/drug addiction (11 towns)
- Poverty (10 towns)
- Violence in the family (10 towns)
- Low level of education (9 towns), Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** Socioeconomic problems in analyzed Cittaslow towns based on SLRP.

The biggest declared problem in all the analyzed cities is unemployment. It results, as we have already emphasized in the introduction, partly from the general tendencies prevailing in Poland, especially in northeastern Poland, and partly from the local specificity. For example, in Gołdap, a peripheral city (but also in other analyzed cities), which was related to the agricultural and agricultural service functions, unemployment is largely related to the lack of jobs after the liquidation of state-owned farms in the period of political transformation after 1989 [31]. Despite the passage of time, the phenomenon of “inheriting” unemployment can be observed. Long-term unemployment was also diagnosed in Reszel and Nowe Miasto Lubawskie. In Nidzica, however, attention was drawn to the insufficient number of production plants that employed residents before 2015.

The problem of domestic violence is confirmed by a large number of initiated “Blue Card” procedures caused by various types of addictions and educational problems of children and adolescents. The Blue Card is a procedure developed by the State Agency for Solving Alcohol Problems. It concerns activities undertaken and carried out in relation to the justified suspicion of the occurrence of domestic violence. Many of those who are affected by or are at risk of social exclusion gradually plunge into addictions, depression and a general lack of willingness to change their life situation. Problems with addiction were diagnosed in most cities, but to a lesser extent in Biskupiec, Nidzica and Nowe Miasto Lubawskie.

As for the issue of poverty, the SLRP analysis shows that it concerns most cities, while the least mention of this crisis occurred in small towns with the smallest population, i.e., Pasy, Reszel and Ryn, which does not seem to be consistent with the fact that it is in the smallest settlements that the inhabitants suffer from poverty (associated with fewer opportunities to find a job).

High unemployment is accompanied by inadequate professional preparation of the unemployed and, consequently, a low level of education. According to the SLRP analysis, high unemployment is the least associated with professional maladjustment in the following cities: Bisztynek, Dobrze Miasto, Gołdap, Lubawa and Nidzica.

The general assumptions regarding social inclusion in the SLPR program include:

- Social integration of excluded people and people who are not adapted to social activities;
- Preventing discrimination and exclusion of people who cannot cope with everyday activities;
- Actions towards public dialogue and preparation of an open society strategy;
- Increasing the quality of life of the inhabitants in accordance with the promotional slogan of the Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship—“healthy life, pure profit”.

In terms of improving the conditions for the development of education, science and culture, the SLPR assumes, among others:

- Enabling cooperation in the field of educational and economic activities to transfer knowledge and exchange experiences;
- Adapting curricula to the standards enabling the acquisition of competencies and qualifications of children and youth;
- Preparation of programs aimed at developing free time for children and adolescents;
- Increasing the social and professional competencies of inhabitants from marginalized areas in order to increase their competitiveness in the labour market.

In terms of creating and supporting social networks, the SLPR also includes a provision concerning, among others:

- Preventing social pathologies and social exclusion;
- Development of projects and guidelines taking into account the strengthening of social ties and professional activation by connecting groups from different environments.

#### 4.2. Diagnosis of Socioeconomic Indicators and Revitalization Projects Related to Selected Towns

An integral and natural part of the development of small towns is constant progress, measured by limiting unfavourable socioeconomic phenomena and taking corrective actions, including revitalization, which should ultimately improve the quality of life of the inhabitants. Improving the quality of life is understood by the authors of this work as ensuring safety, decent living conditions, increasing economic activity, restoring order in the urban space and rebuilding social ties. Revitalization projects are an important instrument of the socioeconomic development of small towns when they are coordinated and responsive to the real socioeconomic problems of urban units. Therefore, in the first step, the authors made a diagnosis of the socioeconomic situation in 14 cities of the Cittaslow network.

##### 4.2.1. Demography

Over the past years, there have been unfavourable demographic changes in the population living in the analyzed cities of Cittaslow. According to GUS data, at the end of 2019, the population of the cities covered by this study was 116,358 people, including 60,516 (52.01%) women. The city of Lidzbark Warmiński (13.49% of the total population of the studied cities), the city of Gołdap (11.78%) and the city of Nidzica (11.77%) had the most inhabitants, and the smallest was in the city of Bisztynek (2.03%).

When analyzing the dynamics of changes in the population in 2015–2019 (Table A1 in Appendix A), a general decrease in the population by 1.39% (1634 people) should be noted. The population decline was recorded in all cities except Lubawa (3% increase), Barczewo (2.9%) and Biskupiec (0.5%). In 11 analyzed cities, there was a decrease in the population, of which the greatest dynamics of change was recorded in Górowo Iławeckie (4.83%) and Nidzica (3.33%). The decline in the population broken down by gender concerned both women and men, but in the latter group, it was more often noticeable (in 12 analyzed cities). The changes in the age structure of the population indicate the ongoing process of “ageing” of the city’s inhabitants, as they are related to the negative average birth rate per 1000 population, which, according to the Central Statistical Office (GUS) data, in 2019 amounted to  $-1.16$  for the analyzed area. The process of the ageing of the population has a demographic as well as an economic and social dimension. This is reflected in changes in the consumption structure (e.g., an increase in the demand for social welfare and health care services), a reduction in professional activity with a simultaneous increase in expenditure on maintaining a growing production group. This forces the implementation of actions by state and local authorities in the field of adapting infrastructure and financial outlays for various areas of socioeconomic life.

##### 4.2.2. Unemployment Rate

The phenomenon of unemployment has negative consequences for society. One of the main indicators for estimating unemployment is the share of the registered unemployed in the working-age population. The calculated indicator for the analyzed area in 2019 was 9.9%, and it is higher than the indicator for the Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodship (9.1%) and the indicator for the country (5.2%). Compared to 2015, the share of the registered unemployed in the working-age population decreased by 7.84% for the studied area.

When analyzing the data (Table A2), it can be noticed that the most favourable situation regarding unemployment is in Lubawa (3.9% of the unemployed in the working-age population), while the most unfavourable situation is in the city of Bisztynek (18.95%). When analyzing the dynamics of changes compared to 2015, it should be emphasized that in all cities there was a decrease in the share of the unemployed in relation to the working-age population, and the most favourable situation was in the city of Olsztynek (a decrease by 64.9%). The problem of unemployment affected women much more often. In 2019, the unemployment rate among women in the analyzed area was 12.4% and was 4.5% higher than the rate for men—7.9%. The largest number of unemployed women lived

in Bisztynek (the unemployment rate was 22.3%), while the most favourable situation on the labour market among women was recorded in Pasym (8%).

Financial problems are a consequence of unemployment for people struggling with unemployment and their families, which also deepen the phenomenon of poverty. Apart from the material effects, a significant problem is the mental condition of the long-term unemployed, their deepening isolation and difficulties with managing their free time. All these crises may lead to further social exclusion, as well as the emergence of further problems in the form of alcoholism, drug addiction and crime. Planned revitalization activities should therefore aim to reduce unemployment in the analyzed area.

#### 4.2.3. Economic Sphere

According to the data of the Central Statistical Office, at the end of 2019, 11,449 business entities were registered in the 14 analyzed cities of the Cittaslow network (including 885 newly registered entities; Table A3). Compared to 2015, there was an increase of 453 entities (4.12%). The largest number of enterprises operated in 2019 in Lidzbark Warmiński (1721), and the least in Pasy (222) and Bisztynek (228). The largest increase in newly registered entities in 2019 compared to 2015 was in Bisztynek (by 81.8%) and Górowo Iławecki (by 73.1%). On the other hand, the largest decrease in operating enterprises was recorded in Ryn (by 5.1%) and Olsztyn (by 4.4%). Among the newly registered enterprises, the largest decrease was recorded in Nowe Miasto Lubawskie (by 27.9%).

When analyzing the entities of the national economy entered in the REGON register, 1.6% of which were in the analyzed area in 2019, 175 entities (1.53% of total entities) declared agriculture, forestry, hunting and fishing as their type of activity and 34% (2558) and 76.13% (8716) of the entities in the register were classified as other activities. Companies from the agriculture, forestry, hunting and fishing sectors dominated in Lubawa (26 entities), Gołdap (24) and Nowe Miasto Lubawskie (23). At the same time, almost all the cities of the Cittaslow network recorded a dynamic growth of companies from the industry and construction sector compared to 2015. The greatest dynamics of changes were recorded in Górowo Iławecki (increase by 38.3%), while the decrease in the number of entities in the industry and construction sector concerned the city of Olsztyn (by 10.1%).

#### 4.2.4. Criminality

One of the main tasks of municipalities is the obligation to meet the collective needs of the community, including the protection of public order. According to the data (Table A4), 1980 crimes were recorded in the analyzed area in 2019. The most crimes were registered in the city of Nidzica (304) and the least in Bisztynek (38). The dynamics of changes as compared to 2015 indicates a decrease in insecurity due to an increase in the number of crimes committed in the analyzed area by 1.29%. The most favourable change in the number of committed crimes was recorded in Nidzica (a decrease in crimes by 21.4%), and the highest dynamics of changes was recorded in Reszel (an increase by 33.3%) and Gołdap (32.3%).

The main cause of crime is various types of social pathologies, which include unemployment, alcoholism, drug addiction and domestic violence. Research conducted in the field of crime in Poland shows that persons suspected of a crime, as well as convicts, often have low education and a lack of professional qualifications [32–35]. The problem of unemployment, especially long-term unemployment, contributes to the increase in crime against property. The constantly decreasing age of people committing crimes is also a significant problem. The main reasons for the increase in crime among children and adolescents are family crises, school failures, belonging to informal group as well as alcoholism and drug addiction. Therefore, cities should undertake revitalization activities solving the above-mentioned social problems. On the one hand, projects minimizing the problem of unemployment are extremely important, on the other hand, activities involving the provision of recreational and leisure places and the implementation of pedagogical and psychological tasks for children and adolescents should be implemented.

#### 4.2.5. Poverty

In each of the analyzed cities of the Cittaslow network, negative social phenomena were diagnosed, leading to social exclusion. The institution dealing with activities in the field of social assistance in the analyzed area is the Municipal Social Welfare Centers. A detailed analysis of the reasons for granting social assistance indicates that the most frequent reasons for using the benefits are poverty, unemployment and protection of motherhood. Nevertheless, important reasons for providing help are alcoholism, drug addiction, domestic violence and homelessness. The total number of people using social assistance in the analyzed cities was 12,002 (in 2015) and 7052 (in 2020) (Table A5). The above data prove a significant decrease in the number of inhabitants using social assistance in the analyzed period (a decrease by 41%). In 2020, most people benefited from social welfare benefits in the cities of Nidzica (884), Barczewo (771) and Gołdap (736), and the least in Ryn (239) and Górowo Iławecki (334). The difficult financial situation was the most common reason for taking advantage of benefits in Lidzbark Warmiński (675). The smallest amount of poverty benefits was granted in the city. Ryn (33). When analyzing the dynamics of changes in comparison to 2015, it should be emphasized that in almost all cities, there was a decrease in the number of people applying for financial aid in Municipal Social Assistance Centre (MSAC) (the exception is Gołdap), and the most favourable situation was in the city of Górowo Iławeckie (decrease by 63%). When analyzing the problem of poverty, it should be emphasized that most of the network cities have developed documents in the field of social policy and carry out planned tasks in the field of solving social problems, counteracting domestic violence and protecting victims of violence, prevention and solving alcohol-related problems. In recent years, the implementation of social welfare tasks has focused on individual social work, including procedures for granting cash benefits in order to reconcile everyday difficulties of persons and families, rather than identifying needs and seeking solutions to eliminate their causes. Properly tailored revitalization projects to solve social problems in Cittaslow cities can mobilize and activate the attitudes of excluded people and contribute to an increase in their readiness to actively participate in the life of the urban community.

#### 4.2.6. Diagnosis of Revitalization Projects

Financial resources for revitalization, including EU funds, are a stimulus for the development of small towns in Poland. Controlling financial instruments for revitalization projects should be aimed at increasing the socioeconomic potential in centres struggling with the problems of unemployment and poverty. By the end of 2020 in the analyzed area, the PPR financed the implementation of 77 social regeneration projects for a total amount of PLN 241,208,909.28 (Table 2).

Among all revitalization projects, projects consisting in the revitalization of space or specific objects dominated. In terms of quantity, the largest number of projects was carried out in Lidzbark Warmiński (10) and Gołdap (10), while the smallest number of revitalization investments was recorded in Dobre Miasto, Lubawa and Reszel (3 projects each). The activity of cities, measured by the number of implemented projects, was not adequate to their total value. In terms of amounts, the greatest amount of funds was allocated to revitalization in Nowe Miasto Lubawskie, Lidzbark Warmiński and Lubawa, while the lowest level of absorption was recorded in Bisztynek and Górowo Iławeckie.

A qualitative analysis of revitalization projects indicates the dominance of activities related to the revitalization of objects or spaces (50) that perform the following functions: cultural, tourist, recreational, educational and public utility. Examples include the revitalization of parks, city markets, centres of social aid, centres of social activation or the development of rivers and lakeshores. All of the above activities were characterized by the possibility of achieving the result indicator (K). The second largest group (24) were social projects supporting the local community, including social services for people who were at risk and socially excluded, the organization of workshops on the professional activation of the unemployed, pro-health services and the comprehensive activation and integration

services for families, youth and children. The last group of activities are projects in the field of thermal modernization (T)—they concerned investments for public buildings (social welfare centres and primary schools), as well as energy modernization of multi-family buildings in the devastated districts of Lidzbark Warmiński.

**Table 2.** Level of absorption of funds for revitalization projects according to result indicators and number of projects.

Town	Total Value of Projects (PLN)	Number of Projects According to Result Indicators		
		U	K	T
Barczewo	11,655,165.00	2	3	
Biskupiec	22,611,571.41	1	4	
Bisztynek	6,014,000.00	2	2	
Dobre Miasto	19,166,616.00	1	2	
Gołdap	11,173,082.87	6	3	1
Górowo Iławeckie	8,613,222.00	1	4	
Lidzbark Warmiński	26,895,000.00	2	6	2
Lubawa	23,800,000.00	1	2	
Nidzica	18,801,077.00	1	5	
Olsztynek	13,200,000.00	2	4	
Pasym	12,641,175.00	2	3	
Reszel	14,606,000.00	1	2	
Ryn	18,194,000.00	1	5	
Nowe Miasto Lubawskie	33,838,000.00	1	5	
Total	241,208,909.28	24	50	3

Where: U—number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion covered by support under the program; K—number of people using the revitalized areas/supported infrastructure; T—thermal modernization.

One of the principles of development policy is the allocation of funds for the implementation of projects in the field of revitalization, in particular where this assistance is most needed. An effective implementation of revitalization activities should contribute to reducing disproportions in the socioeconomic development of small towns belonging to the Cittaslow network and increase their attractiveness as places of “good and decent living”. Therefore, taking 2019 as the base period, and taking into account the value of regeneration projects per capita, class divisions were made for the analyzed cities and then compared with socioeconomic indicators. The data used for the calculations are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Calculations of class intervals for the cities of the Cittaslow network (own elaboration based on SLRP, 2015, and GUS, 2020).

Town	Total Value of Projects (PLN)	Population (Data of BDL—Population in Total at the End of 2019)	Contribution for 1 Person (PLN)
Barczewo	11,655,165.00	7501	1553.81
Biskupiec	22,611,571.41	10,634	2126.35
Bisztynek	6,014,000.00	2359	2549.39
Dobre Miasto	19,166,616.00	10,182	1882.40
Gołdap	11,173,082.87	13,708	815.08
Górowo Iławeckie	8,613,222.00	3940	2186.10
Lidzbark Warmiński	26,895,000.00	15,697	1713.38
Lubawa	23,800,000.00	10,388	2291.11
Nidzica	18,801,077.00	13,694	1372.94
Olsztynek	13,200,000.00	10,850	1216.59
Pasym	12,641,175.00	7514	1682.35
Reszel	14,606,000.00	2498	5847.08
Ryn	18,194,000.00	4550	3998.68
Nowe Miasto Lubawskie	33,838,000.00	2843	11,902.22

The equal span method was used to determine the class boundaries between individual cities. The results of calculations in terms of class intervals, in accordance with the previously presented calculation methodology, are presented in Tables 4 and 5.

**Table 4.** Calculations of class intervals for the cities of the Cittaslow network.

Equal Span Intervals				
C = 2217.43			TAI = 0.83	
Calculated Values				
Class Intervals	D	G	Range of Classes	Number of Cities in a Given Class
1	815.08	3032.51	2217.43	11
2	3032.51	5249.94	2217.43	1
3	5249.94	7467.37	2217.43	1
4	7467.37	9684.80	2217.43	0
5	9684.80	11,902.23	2217.43	1

**Table 5.** Calculation of class intervals for Cittaslow cities.

Town	Contribution per 1 Person (PLN)		Equal Class Span Method	
	$x_i$	$x_i - \bar{x}$	$\bar{x}_j$	$x_{ij} - \bar{x}_j$
Gołdap	815.08	2123.31		947.60
Olsztyn	1216.59	1721.80		546.09
Nidzica	1372.94	1565.45		389.74
Barczewo	1553.81	1384.58	1762.68	208.87
Pasym	1682.35	1256.04		80.33
Lidzbark Warmiński	1713.38	1225.01		49.30
Dobre Miasto	1882.40	1055.99		119.72
Biskupiec	2126.35	812.04		363.67
Górowo Iławeckie	2186.10	752.29		423.42
Lubawa	2291.11	647.29		528.43
Bisztynek	2549.39	389.01		786.71
Ryn	3998.68	1060.29	3998.68	0.00
Reszel	5847.08	2908.69	5847.08	0.00
Nowe Miasto Lub.	11,902.22	8963.83	11,902.22	0.00
$\sum$		25,865.61		4443.86
$\bar{x}$	2938.39 PLN			

The analysis of the quantitative distribution of the value of revitalization projects per person in the spatial arrangement indicates a very high support of Nowe Miasto Lubawskie. On the other hand, Ryn and Reszel also significantly differ from other cities in terms of the value of regeneration projects per capita. The cities of the Cittaslow network that ranked in the first class range included 11 centers, among which the lowest level of completed revitalization projects per capita was in Gołdap.

Taking into account the diagnosis of the socioeconomic situation in the 14 analyzed cities and the results of the quantitative distribution of the value of revitalization projects per capita in the spatial distribution, it should be noted that the most money allocated for the projects was directed to the city which did not belong to the group of cities with the greatest diagnosed socioeconomic problems. Nowe Miasto Lubawskie was characterized by an average unemployment rate, a high number of business entities, and a decrease in the number of people applying for financial assistance due to poverty. At the same time, the qualitative analysis of the revitalization projects (6) realized in Nowe Miasto Lubawskie indicates that the largest proportion of investment activities was connected with the revitalization of the market square, green areas and the modernization of public

buildings. Only one project concerned social issues—complex support for dysfunctional families living in the revitalized area.

Ryn, similar to Nowe Miasto Lubawskie, belonged to the group of cities with a relatively high socioeconomic potential and was characterized by a low unemployment rate, a decrease in crime and a highly dynamic number of people benefiting from social assistance. Among the six revitalization projects, only one was directly related to social and professional activation of the inhabitants threatened with an exclusion, while the remaining ones were investment projects related to the revitalization of public space.

Reszel is the only example confirming the thesis that the control of EU financial instruments for revitalization projects should be aimed at increasing the socioeconomic potential, mainly in the cities facing problems of unemployment and poverty. Unemployment and a high crime rate are major problems in this city. The qualitative analysis of the revitalization projects (three) carried out in Reszel shows that each of them concerned direct social support, in particular the socio-occupational activation of those excluded and at risk of social exclusion, and the development of public space by restoring the integration and recreational functions of the town park and its surroundings.

#### 4.3. Expert Assessment Results

Experts expressed their opinion pointing to the great importance of the revitalization process in the perception of Cittaslow cities as attractive places in terms of quality of life (Figure 3, Point I).

*“... Definitely creating a program that allows you to receive non-competitive funding is very helpful and has a significant impact on increasing the attractiveness of cities to a good and dignified life ... most small towns, especially in the province of the Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship is struggling with the problem of exclusion or unemployment ... it is probably due to historical (resettlement) and economic conditions (state-owned farms, many closed plants that were dynamically operating in the 70s–90s were closed) ... ”.* (Expert no 1)

*“... In this way, cities implementing the SLRP were given a unique chance to overcome their weaknesses and to compensate for their development disproportions in relation to larger urban centres in the Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship ... ”.* (Expert no 7)

As for the motivation to initiate the process of revitalization, experts point out that the plans for the revitalization of cities such targets the quality of life of all residents were highlighted. The issue of the integration of residents was also important, as was the possibility of increasing professional activity (Figure 3, Point II).

*“... it seems that it is the improvement of the quality of life of all inhabitants and social integration that play the greatest importance here ... ”.* (Expert no 17)

*“... The main aim of revitalization is to increase the attractiveness and integration of the residents ... ”.* (Expert no 1)

As far as the importance of the revitalization process for marginalized areas is concerned, according to experts, the biggest advantage is the integration of all city residents with the residents of marginalized areas, then the improvement of the quality of life and, to a lesser extent, increasing the activity of residents. Experts also agree that the revitalization did not bring any results in terms of activity in the cultural life of the city (Figure 3, Point III).

*“... revitalization projects in a small way contributed to the overall empowerment of people. Many of them still need the support of specialists and institutions. Among the residents living in marginalized areas, a small number of them became socially active ... they also did not show any noticeable activity in cultural life and did not return to the social welfare system”.* (Expert no 3)



Figure 3. Matrix showing the range of experts' responses.

Experts' opinions are divided when it comes to reducing unemployment and poverty. Some of them see the relationship between the results of the revitalization process and the possibility of employment, but only indirectly (Figure 3, Point IV).

"... Often, the required result of projects is the creation of jobs or favourable conditions for the creation of new jobs...". (Expert no 4)

"... Often in renovated places (after revitalization), new jobs are expected to be created, mainly in the tourism-related industry—gastronomy, breweries, hotel industry, tourist information...". (Expert no 20)

Despite the above, some respondents claim that the number of social projects has increased to a large extent, but these projects are not always appropriate in terms of quality (Figure 3, Point V).

"... The creation of a SLRP probably creates favourable conditions for increasing the efficiency and quality of projects, because the local government, knowing that it has dedicated resources, can focus on developing planned activities... However, there is a

*risk that in the case of “exhaustion of ideas”, projects will be implemented “by force” only for this purpose. to use the available funds ... ”. (Expert no 1)*

*“ ... Compared to the revitalization before 2015, it should be noted that a wider dimension of these activities is noticeable in the 2014–2020 perspective ... ”. (Expert no 7)*

*“ ... Therefore, participation in projects increases the social and professional activity of people at risk of social exclusion. In addition, it increases self-esteem ... ”. (Expert no 4)*

Although, according to experts, revitalization projects did not reduce unemployment and poverty, some of the respondents point to the willingness to change and the willingness to gain new qualifications and skills by residents from marginalized areas participating in pro-social and educational revitalization projects (Figure 3, Point VI).

*“ ... As part of these projects, participants who were in a difficult life situation were given the possibility of social and professional activation. The situation related to COVID-19 significantly hindered the chances of employment, especially in such a difficult local labour market, but certainly, the participation in various theoretical and practical classes with qualified staff allowed to increase one’s awareness strengthened self-esteem and motivated to change ... ”. (Expert no 4)*

*“ ... It should be clearly stated that each form of investment activity has a positive effect not only on space but also on people ... ”. (Expert no 7)*

*“ ... My analysis shows that a long-term degraded area will not retain its young residents. Development opportunities can only be noticed in the area where there is a qualitative improvement in the life of the residents”. (Expert no 9)*

Another issue pointed out by experts is the lack of effects of social projects in terms of reducing alcoholism and drug addiction, but they see the possibility of including specialized programs preventing these problems as part of revitalization (Figure 3, Point VII).

*“ ... It is of course not excluded that the phenomenon of this problem is not alcohol limited. It is certain, however, that the revitalized space has the potential to counteract the phenomena of alcoholism and drug addiction ... ”. (Expert no 7)*

*“ ... The program guidelines would have to indicate for such activities ... ”. (Expert no 21)*

According to experts, the situation with crime reduction looks a bit better. Although this problem persists, especially in marginalized areas, appropriate protection and monitoring of the revitalized area affect the safety of residents.

*“ ... the projects assume the creation of monitoring and this may be a factor that prevents crimes ... ”. (Expert no 1)*

*“ ... crime threats in the revitalized area do not increase. Often, preventive actions (video surveillance) and an orderly space are not crime-friendly places. Active use of the revitalized area has a positive effect on counteracting this phenomenon ... ”. (Expert no 7)*

Experts point out the necessity for future revitalization programs to increase the number of projects still aimed at the integration of residents but also, for example, cultural education (Figure 3, Point IX). When it comes to improving the quality of projects, the specification is important, according to experts. Projects should be adapted to specific cities and an individual approach to social and economic problems. It is important to control and constantly monitor the effectiveness of projects (Figure 3, Point X).

## 5. Discussion

There are no exhaustive studies on the achieved effects in the cities belonging to the national Cittaslow network (not only Polish but also other national organizations) based on implemented programs and specific projects. Most studies are selective in nature, i.e., they concern only a selected area in the life of the city (e.g., effects related to the revitalization of

urban space [36–38], sustainable transportation [13], effects related to the development of tourism [39,40] or the effects of promotion [41–43]) or cover one or more Cittaslow cities, being more case studies [44–48].

One such study analyzed the impact of belonging to the Cittaslow network on the increase in the quality of life and economic development of small Turkish cities. The results of the research conducted among 762 inhabitants of the selected slow cities show the benefits of the Cittaslow movement in terms of the development of the socioeconomic potential of the analyzed cities, which has a direct impact on the slowdown of strong migration of inhabitants to larger urban centres [49]. These results coincide with the results of our study in terms of the analyzed statistical indicators in 2015–2019, which indicate an increase in the number of business entities operating in the vast majority of analyzed cities (11), as well as a significant reduction in unemployment in all cities subject to the study (14). At the same time, the results of expert research show that the implemented projects have no direct impact on reducing unemployment. Experts only indicate that indirectly improving the quality of life and revitalizing urban space may generate additional jobs in the future. The implemented projects may also trigger an impulse for change in terms of professional activity and the desire to acquire new skills by the inhabitants of Cittaslow cities. However, as experts claim, this impulse to change is smaller among the inhabitants of marginalized areas, and it was them who were the target of pro-social revitalization projects. Results of other studies conducted in South Africa [50] and other regions of Poland [3] confirm the relationship between the revitalization process and the implementation of pro-social projects as well as the improvement of the quality of life and the integration of inhabitants of small towns and cities. For comparison, in our study, the experts positively assess the purposefulness of the implemented projects and the fulfilment of the assumptions adopted in the SLRP.

The situation is different when it comes to increasing the activity of the inhabitants, especially in cultural and educational matters. According to the statements of our experts, the goals adopted in the SLPR were not fully achieved in this respect, and the projects did not achieve the result that was initially assumed. In the SLPR, education and culture are some of the leading directions in the development of small towns. Interestingly, the experts did not notice any significant effects in this regard, and they point to a fairly significant, but not the most important, relationship of projects in the field of sociocultural and cultural activities in the subsequent recruitment for future revitalization programs. Meanwhile, from research conducted by the Polish Economic Institute [51] shows that there is a 68% chance that in small towns there will be cooperation between local governments, local businesses and non-profit organizations but also with cultural, education and sports institutions, which will ultimately become a factor of urban development.

Experts also emphasize the need to pay attention to the quality of projects and their careful selection, and not only the quantity. They state that in addition to individual solutions for individual cities, it will be important to analyze the effectiveness and control the results. The need for an individual approach to project planning has been noticed in the studies of small towns carried out in Italy, Sweden, Albania, US [52], Czech Republic, Germany, France, Hungary [53] and Romania [54]. It is worth mentioning here another study conducted in Vize, one of the Turkish cities of the Cittaslow network [55]. The study describes numerous projects implemented there, which had a positive impact on the quality of life of the inhabitants of the commune and improved the attractiveness of the city for visitors. The results of the Turkish research suggest that an extremely important element of the effective implementation of the assumed projects is the cooperation of the local government with the city residents. An element necessary to build the involvement of the local community in the initiatives planned to be implemented is constantly informing them about the benefits of belonging to the network, as well as the effects of the implemented projects. This is confirmed by other studies conducted in Poland among 100 inhabitants from 10 Polish member cities [56]. Most of the respondents did not equate the city's accession to the Cittaslow Network with the improvement of the quality of life of its

inhabitants. It was found that the accession of cities to the Cittaslow Network was a strictly promotional activity, the main purpose of which was to obtain funds from projects promoting the Cittaslow idea and to gain advertising opportunities by participating in various types of events of international importance. The opinion of the inhabitants of Cittaslow cities shows that there are no significant effects that are assumed in the documents and strategies.

The SLRP implemented in the analyzed region is unique in Europe. That is confirmed by the preliminary results of the authors' research conducted within the framework of the LIVA bilateral project on the quality of life and revitalization of public spaces in small towns in Slovakia, as well as a research project with scientist from Vytautas Magnus University (VMU) on comparing the specifics of small-town development in Poland and Lithuania.

The analysis of revitalization policy in Lithuania and Slovakia shows that unlike the Polish example both Lithuania and Slovakia do not have a specific programme involving several cities undertaking joint revitalization [57]. In both countries, revitalization policies cover only individual actions in individual cities targeted at specific projects in specific areas.

Large-scale revitalization activities in small towns in Slovakia depend on resources from the state budget and EU funds. An example of such activities is Gelnica (Košice region), where funds from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) under the priority axis of Settlement Regeneration were allocated for activities related to the rehabilitation of infrastructure and public space after the floods that occurred in 2014 and 2015. Gelnica received this money as a grant from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Slovak Republic. Another example is the town of Levoča in Prešov region, where public space revitalization activities were implemented with support from the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund [58].

In the case of Slovakia, revitalization projects mostly concern the improvement of technical infrastructure (roads, transport) and the development of public spaces (squares, squares, parks). In terms of the use of EU funds, projects related to social activities and educational activities are to a small and medium extent, while to the smallest extent, they concern the improvement of buildings and architecture for residential and service purposes [59].

In Lithuania, revitalization projects in small towns, as in Slovakia, are largely implemented with EU funds. [60–64]. In the last programming period, revitalization actions were implemented with Operational Programme for the European Union Funds' Investments in 2014–2020 under Investment Priority 5.6, taking actions to improve the urban environment, revitalization of cities, regeneration and decontamination of brownfield sites (including conversion areas), reduction of air pollution and promotion of noise-reduction measures [65].

As far as Lithuania is concerned, the use of EU funds in revitalization projects to a medium extent concerns technical infrastructure and services and residential buildings. The complementary activities are vocational activation and education, while on a small scale, the implemented projects concern the improvement of the inhabitants' quality of life and social integration.

Analyzing the revitalization programmes for small towns in peripheral regions in Lithuania (Kaunas region) and Slovakia (Presov region, Kosice Region) and the projects implemented on their basis, it should be stated that they have no or very little effect on reducing unemployment, increasing the number of enterprises, crime reduction and poverty reduction [57].

The diagnosis shows that in both countries the activities connected with the improvement of technical infrastructure were more important, while to a very small extent revitalization was connected with the improvement of the quality of life of the inhabitants in the sense of their integration or cultural and educational activities. The realized and implemented projects have also not significantly influenced the reduction of important socioeconomic problems.

## 6. Conclusions

Most of the research to date has focused on the potential rather than real benefits of Cittaslow membership. This study fills the gap in this respect because it contains a comprehensive analysis of the effects of the current implementation of regeneration activities for all cities covered by SLRP in 2015. Based on the obtained results, it was found that the most important measurable effects that the vast majority of cities achieved, among others, thanks to the implementation of revitalization and rehabilitation measures, is the overcoming of the following measured socioeconomic problems: decrease in unemployment, increase in entrepreneurship, decrease in poverty and decrease in crime. Participation in the Cittaslow network-enabled cities from the Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship to implement 77 projects of a social nature, of which almost one-third of activities were aimed directly at people at risk of poverty or social exclusion, and 65% of the projects had measurable effects for all inhabitants and visitors to the analyzed cities. The smallest group of activities were thermo-modernization projects for public buildings, as well as the modernization of multi-family buildings in devastated neighbourhoods of small towns. All of the implemented initiatives were intended to increase the quality of life of the inhabitants of small towns, and as indicated by the analysis of the socioeconomic situation, the implemented projects met this task.

Although the results of research based on the comparison of economic indicators in 2015–2019 show an improvement in living conditions, the experts say that the reductions in unemployment and poverty do not result directly from the implemented regeneration projects. At the same time, experts say that the implemented revitalization projects have brought the effect of improving the quality of life of residents, or a slight reduction in crime, assumed in the SLRP. However, they emphasize the need to pay attention to the quality and not the number of projects in the future program. Therefore, based on the results of the research, we recommend a more detailed diagnosis and adaptation of future projects to the individual character of cities, including marginalized areas. Another important issue, in our opinion, is the need to pay attention to the provisions of the program and its implementation to projects that help to implement the previously developed results of social and educational activities, especially among people from marginalized groups.

The authors make a reservation that despite efforts and due diligence, this study does not exhaust all aspects of the issue. Therefore, the obtained results should be interpreted taking into account the specificity of the described assumptions and ranges. Considering that the conducted study included a sample of only 14 small towns of the Cittaslow network in Poland (coming from one region), this limits the generalizations that can be drawn from its results. At the same time, it should be emphasized that the authors' identification of the socioeconomic problems and completed revitalization projects in 14 cities covered by the SLRP is an important contribution to future research, involving not only a larger research sample but also extending to other countries. What may arouse particular curiosity and be the subject of future research by the authors is the existence of various legal and financial specificities in the field of revitalization activities undertaken in small towns of other countries. The issues that bother the authors, and which may become research problems in the future, include, among others: research on the effects of revitalization projects for the needs of the elderly and the disabled, the direction of redistribution of funds for revitalization and their correlation with the socioeconomic situation in small towns, as well as analyses of the development paths of small towns depending on the revitalization and rehabilitation policies conducted in them. An interesting subject for observation in the field of the revitalization of small towns is the possibility of using space and facilities in marginalized areas with historic values and those of importance for heritage. In addition, it is important to conduct research on the effective policy of revitalizing small towns in the context of the new EU financial programming period for the years from 2021 to 2027.

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**Informed Consent Statement:** The participants received information at the beginning of the interview about the purpose of the survey. The participation was voluntary and anonymous, and the personal data of the respondents were not stored in order to respect anonymity and confidentiality. The informed written consents of the participants have not been distinctly conducted and given since the privacy and personal identity information of all participants were protected. The participation in the interview was optional.

**Data Availability Statement:** The analyses were made on the basis of the information contained in the Supralocal Revitalization Program of the Network of Cittaslow Towns for 2014–2020 (SLRP) (2015) available on [www.cittaslowpolska.pl](http://www.cittaslowpolska.pl) (accessed on 10 March 2021). The initial data on the interview method presented in this study, collected separately from experts, are available on request from the corresponding author.

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## Appendix A. Comprehensive Results Tables

**Table A1.** Number of inhabitants in the analyzed 14 Cittaslow cities (Own elaboration based on data of the Central Statistical Office of Poland, 2015, 2019).

Town	Population (Numer of People)								
	Total			Women			Men		
	2015	2019	Dynamics	2015	2019	Dynamics	2015	2019	Dynamics
Barczewo	7290	7501	↑↑↑	3796	3910	↑↑↑	3494	3591	↑↑↑
Biskupiec	10,582	10,634	↑	5605	5691	↑↑	4977	4943	↓
Bisztynek	2437	2359	↓↓	1309	1266	↓↓↓	1128	1093	↓↓
Dobre Miasto	10,471	10,182	↓↓	5445	5292	↓↓	5026	4890	↓↓
Gołdap	13,726	13,708	↓	6978	7008	↑↑	6748	6700	↓
Górowo Iławeckie	4140	3940	↓↓↓	2115	2014	↓↓↓	2025	1926	↓↓↓
Lidzbark Warmiński	16,200	15,697	↓↓	8421	8185	↓↓	7779	7512	↓↓↓
Lubawa	10,083	10,388	↑↑↑	5187	5359	↑↑↑	4896	5029	↑↑↑
Nidzica	14,166	13,694	↓↓↓	7420	7155	↓↓↓	6746	6539	↓↓
Nowe Miasto Lubawskie	11,101	10,850	↓↓	5800	5676	↓↓	5301	5174	↓↓
Olsztynek	7669	7514	↓↓	3960	3876	↓↓	3709	3638	↓↓
Pasym	2561	2498	↓↓	1303	1281	↓↓	1258	1217	↓↓↓
Reszel	4667	4550	↓↓	2434	2372	↓↓	2233	2178	↓↓
Ryn	2899	2843	↓↓	1459	1431	↓↓	1440	1412	↓↓

Dynamics of change (%): 100.1–101.1 ↑; 101.2–102.2 ↑↑; 102.3–103.3 ↑↑↑; 95.1–96.7 ↓↓↓; 96.8–98.3 ↓↓; 98.4–99.9 ↓.

**Table A2.** Unemployment rate (%) in the analyzed 14 Cittaslow cities (Own elaboration based on data of the Central Statistical Office of Poland, 2015, 2019).

Town	Estimated Registered Unemployment Rate (%)								
	Total			Women			Men		
	2015	2019	Dynamics	2015	2019	Dynamics	2015	2019	Dynamics
Barczewo	16.7	8.1	↓↓	19.8	9.8	↓↓	13.9	6.7	↓↓
Biskupiec	21.3	11.4	↓↓	23.4	14.5	↓↓	19.5	8.7	↓↓
Bisztynek	24	18.9	↓	25.4	22.3	↓	22.8	16.1	↓
Dobre Miasto	19.4	13.5	↓	19.8	15.9	↓	19.1	11.5	↓↓
Gołdap	17.3	8.1	↓↓	23	10.9	↓↓	12.4	5.7	↓↓
Górowo Iławeckie	23.1	13.8	↓↓	24.8	18.3	↓	21.7	10.3	↓↓
Lidzbark Warmiński	17.1	9.8	↓↓	18.6	12.1	↓↓	15.7	7.7	↓↓
Lubawa	6.1	3.9	↓↓	8.3	4.5	↓↓	4.1	3.3	↓
Nidzica	13.6	6.8	↓↓	16.7	8.8	↓↓	11	5.2	↓↓
Nowe Miasto Lubawskie	12.8	7.4	↓↓	15.9	9.8	↓↓	10	5.3	↓↓
Olsztyniek	17.1	6	↓↓↓	20.1	7.6	↓↓	14.4	4.6	↓↓↓
Pasym	15.4	6.3	↓↓	17.3	8	↓↓	13.8	4.8	↓↓
Reszel	28.8	15.6	↓↓	28.4	17.6	↓↓	29.1	14.1	↓↓
Ryn	15.6	9	↓↓	19.1	13.9	↓	12.8	6.7	↓↓

Dynamics of change (%): 66.7–100 ↓↓↓; 33.4–66.6 ↓↓; 0–33.3 ↓.

**Table A3.** Number of national economy entities entered in REGON register in the analyzed 14 Cittaslow cities (Own elaboration based on data of the Central Statistical Office of Poland, 2015, 2019).

Town	National Economy Entities Entered in REGON Register																	
	Total			Agriculture, Forestry, Hunting and Fishing			Industry & Construction			Other Business			Newly Registered			Deregistered		
	2015	2019	Dynamics	2015	2019	Dynamics	2015	2019	Dynamics	2015	2019	Dynamics	2015	2019	Dynamics	2015	2019	Dynamics
Barczewo	579	657	↑	3	2	↓↓↓	140	165	↑	436	490	↑	62	62	*	43	32	↓↓↓
Biskupiec	1029	1094	↑	13	17	↑↑	209	220	↑	807	857	↑	83	84	↑	73	49	↓↓↓
Bisztynek	217	228	↑	8	6	↓↓↓	45	53	↑	164	169	↑	11	20	↑↑↑	8	9	↑
Dobre Miasto	868	896	↑	12	13	↑	172	184	↑	684	699	↑	70	74	↑	69	44	↓↓↓
Gołdap	1395	1451	↑	27	24	↓	323	372	↑	1045	1055	↑	79	98	↑	95	64	↓↓↓
Górowo Iławeckie	382	428	↑	8	8	*	60	83	↑↑	314	337	↑	26	45	↑↑↑	29	26	↓
Lidzbark Warmiński	1613	1721	↑	14	11	↓↓	294	338	↑	1305	1372	↑	103	126	↑	99	92	↓
Lubawa	865	926	↑	19	26	↑↑	204	223	↑	642	677	↑	79	69	↓↓	67	31	↓↓↓
Nidzica	1345	1320	↓	22	20	↓	304	323	↑	1019	977	↓	91	103	↑	104	90	↓↓
N. M. Lubawskie	1038	1069	↑	22	23	↑	219	247	↑	797	799	↑	104	75	↓↓↓	86	65	↓↓↓
Olsztyniek	750	717	↓	11	9	↓	147	132	↓	592	576	↓	59	52	↓↓	64	48	↓↓↓
Pasym	216	222	↑	6	6	*	71	77	↑	139	139	↑	25	28	↑	21	12	↓↓↓
Reszel	385	422	↑	4	5	↑	60	71	↑	321	346	↑	22	30	↑↑	26	25	↓↓
Ryn	314	298	↓	7	5	↓↓↓	65	70	↑	242	223	↓	29	19	↓↓↓	30	22	↓↓↓

Dynamics of change (%): 100.1–127.3 ↑; 127.4–154.6 ↑↑; 154.7–181.8 ↑↑↑; 66.5–76.9 ↓↓↓; 77.0–88.4 ↓↓; 88.5–99.9 ↓; unchanged\*.

**Table A4.** Number of crimes in the analyzed 14 Cittaslow cities (Own elaboration based on data of the Central Statistical Office of Poland, 2015, 2019).

Town	Crime Registered (Number)																	
	Total		Criminal		Against Property		Traffic Offences		Economic Crimes		Against Life and Health							
	2015	2019	2015	2019	2015	2019	2015	2019	2015	2019	2015	2019	2015	2019				
Barczewo	108	113	↑	80	76	↓	61	43	↓↓	10	10	*	15	21	↑↑	3	4	↑↑
Biskupiec	158	160	↑	115	108	↓	88	61	↓↓	22	29	↑↑	15	14	↓	5	5	*
Biszynek	37	38	↑	28	26	↓	17	11	↓↓	4	6	↑↑	4	5	↑	1	1	*
Dobre Miasto	157	154	↓	114	103	↓	87	59	↓↓	22	28	↑	15	13	↓	5	5	*
Gołdap	192	254	↑↑	115	137	↑	80	95	↑	35	64	↑↑↑	25	38	↑↑	9	4	↓↓↓
Górowo I.	63	64	↑	47	43	↓	29	18	↓↓	7	9	↑	7	8	↑	2	2	*
Lidzbark W.	256	234	↓	197	142	↓↓	142	117	↓	30	55	↑↑↑	18	26	↑↑	13	12	↓↓
Lubawa	178	190	↑	126	120	↓	88	84	↓	25	38	↑↑	19	22	↑	6	3	↓↓↓
Nidzica	387	304	↓↓↓	234	206	↓	177	130	↓	110	42	↓↓↓	27	35	↑↑	8	10	↑
N. M. Lubawskie	156	187	↑	99	112	↑	56	64	↑	25	42	↑↑↑	19	26	↑↑	3	2	↓↓
Olsztynek	115	113	↓	84	76	↓	64	43	↓↓	16	21	↑↑	11	10	↓	3	4	↑↑
Pasym	46	51	↑	31	32	↑	23	22	↓	9	10	↑	5	6	↑	2	1	↓↓↓
Reszel	51	68	↑↑	33	43	↑↑	28	23	↓	7	13	↑↑↑	7	9	↑	2	2	*
Ryn	51	50	↓	39	33	↓	31	19	↓↓↓	5	7	↑↑	5	7	↑↑	2	1	↓↓↓

Dynamics of change (%): 100.1–128.6 ↑; 128.7–157.2 ↑↑; 157.3–185.7 ↑↑↑; 44.4–62.8 ↓↓↓; 62.9–81.4 ↓↓; 81.5–99.9 ↓; unchanged \*.

**Table A5.** Number of inhabitants using social welfare benefits in the analyzed 14 Cittaslow cities (Own elaboration based on data of data of the Municipal Social Assistance Centre 2015, 2019).

	Total		Unemployment		Poverty		Homelessness		Orphanhood		ProtectionMaternity		Drug Abuse		Alcoholism		Domestic Violence	
	2015	2020	2015	2020	2015	2020	2015	2020	2015	2020	2015	2020	2015	2020	2015	2020	2015	2020
Barczewo	1348	771	605	327	790	425	32	42	0	0	55	29	0	2	17	16	1	0
Biskupiec	1376	645	643	471	1305	236	36	45	1	0	136	107	5	6	159	95	78	56
Biszynek	1027	584	745	309	490	216	2	2	2	0	184	67	0	0	73	20	14	0
Dobre Miasto	676	547	488	313	458	263	20	21	0	0	116	86	8	1	130	24	4	1
Gołdap	637	736	349	267	408	317	28	26	0	0	5	28	2	1	4	12	3	5
Górowo Iławskie	901	334	217	172	0	71	1	0	0	0	6	11	0	0	1	1	0	0
Lidzbark Warmiński	654	492	443	297	322	675	32	40	2	0	134	69	8	8	112	65	46	46
Lubawa	793	435	335	166	533	432	14	28	0	2	187	155	0	4	52	13	27	18
Nidzica	1297	884	388	145	223	96	25	17	0	0	111	71	3	6	51	36	6	4
N. M. Lubawskie	1307	574	903	306	1142	458	11	4	3	0	516	232	1	0	59	34	84	131
Olsztynek	1411	701	338	152	351	262	18	10	0	0	60	34	3	3	24	24	2	15
Pasym	679	470	184	63	102	162	3	7	0	0	114	50	0	0	4	11	11	1
Reszel	1244	650	981	445	1077	496	6	12	0	0	445	183	0	0	46	5	10	4
Ryn	459	239	242	120	93	33	3	0	2	0	21	13	0	0	8	4	0	0

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