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**ANALYSIS OF STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF BUSINESS
ENVIRONMENT INSTITUTIONS FROM WARMIA-MASURIAN
VOIVODESHIP AS WELL AS OPPORTUNITIES
AND THREATS FOR THEIR OPERATIONS**

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Abstract: Business environment institutions create an ambient for small and medium-sized enterprises, their activities are reflected in, among others the competitiveness of this group of entities. Within a dynamically changing market economy the BEI, similar to other entities, compete with one another. In the effort to achieve and maintain market advantage, BEI, similar to other organisations, are forced to conduct in depth environment analysis. The paper aims at analysing the environment and internal conditions of operation for business environment institutions in Warmia-Masurian voivodeship. The presented results come from the surveys conducted for implementation of the project *Business Environment Institutions survey from the perspective of the competitiveness and innovation of services provided with recommendations*, developed within the frameworks of the project Regional System of Services – InnoWaMa Network implemented with involvement of the Operational Programme Human Capital 2007–2013 (VIII. Regional Staff of the Economy, measure 8.2 Knowledge Transfer, sub-measure 8.2.2 Regional Innovation Strategies) by the Department of Regional Policy of the Marshal's Office of the Warmia-Masurian Province in Olsztyn. The main information source for the preparation of this publication was the primary research conducted using a survey method. The basis for an analysis was data collected from 24 BEI.

Introduction

Increasing competition and narrow production specialisation force entrepreneurs, particularly those belonging to the SME sector, to use services of specialists, first of all in areas such as advertising, consulting, marketing, public relations, research and development works, etc.¹ Support of that type is offered to entrepreneurs by business environment institutions (BEI). They belong to the category of non-profit institutions that is they do not operate for profit or allocate the profit for their statutory goals. Business environment institutions possess the material base, technical and human resources as well as competences necessary for providing services for socio-economic development of the region.

The paper aims at analysing the environment and internal conditions of operation for business environment institutions in Warmia-Masurian voivodeship. The presented results come from the surveys conducted for implementation of the project *Business Environment Institutions survey from the perspective of the competitiveness and innovation of services provided with recommendations*, developed within the frameworks of the project Regional System of Services - InnoWaMa Network, implemented with involvement of the Operational Programme Human Capital 2007–2013 (VIII. Regional Staff of the Economy, measure 8.2 Knowledge Transfer, sub-measure 8.2.2 Regional Innovation Strategies) by the Department of Regional Policy of the *Marshal's Office* of the *Warmia-Masurian Provence in Olsztyn*. Primary research conducted in two stages formed the basic source of information for drafting this publication. Stage one was implemented in May 2010 using the mail and e-mail questionnaire distributed to all business environment institutions from Warmia-Masurian voivodeship. Complete and filled in questionnaires were received from 45 institutions and the rate of returns was 42.9%. Next, for stage two of the survey, the institutions positively outstanding in terms of the way of operating and the level of services provided were selected. The scoring method provided the instrument that allowed ranking the surveyed institutions. Stage two of the research was conducted in June 2010 by applying the technique of categorised direct interviews. Those covered 27 institutions, however, the empirical material was obtained from 24 entities. That stage was of key importance for conducting the analysis of BEI surveyed because it allowed gathering information related to self-evaluation of the institutions concerning their influence on the development of the region, influence on competitiveness and innovation of enterprises as well as the environment, resources and competences.

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Theoretical aspects of functioning of the business environment institutions

Mizgajska (2002) makes the division of the BEI into four major types: entities providing services to the SMEs, organisations of entrepreneurs, non-government organisations operating for the SMEs and research institutes and academic institutions. Operations of the BEI focus, as a consequence, on providing various types of services, i.e. actions, benefits and satisfaction offered for sale.

Many important functions are attributed to the business environment institutions. It is believed that they are responsible in particular for (Filipiak, Ruszała 2009):

- creating favourable conditions for transfer of new technological solutions (Technology Transfer Centres – TTC, technology incubators),
- quality improvement of human resources in enterprises by means of training and consulting (training-consulting centres),
- support to co-operation links among entrepreneurs,
- creating networks of co-operation and stimulating the innovative community of enterprises,
- financing innovation and development,
- intellectual property rights protection,
- support of start up and providing assistance to newly established enterprises,
- marketing and promotion.

The product offered by the business environment institutions is specific and its special character results from, on the one hand, the needs of the units served – in most cases enterprises, and, on the other, is conditioned by the character of the institution itself (Pawlik 2009).

Competition is the core of the market economy. Thus, competitiveness of an entity means its ability to find and maintain competitive advantage. Competitive advantage means favourable positioning of the business in relation to its competitors in the process of serving the market and attracting clients. Competitive advantage usually involves one or a number of factors differentiating the operations of the given entity (*Zarządzanie...* 2005).

Within a dynamically changing market economy the BEI, similar to other entities, compete with one another. Achievement of lasting success becomes a very difficult task and forces paying more attention to continual interest in the level of service, market research and customer satisfaction. Establishing good contacts with the client, precise defining of its expectations and needs or even getting ahead of them through, e.g. implementing innovation in BEI operations can become the way to strengthen their competitive position.

In the effort to achieve and maintain market advantage, BEI, similar to other organisations, are forced to conduct in depth environment analysis. That environment may be analysed in the economic, technological, social, demographic,

political or legal aspect. The process of environment identification is subjective in its nature while the evaluation is filtered through cultural filters and subjective perception of processes, phenomena, trends or also individualised assessment of their weight and power of influence on the institution (Gierszewska, Romanowska 2009).

Every entity exists thanks to its environment with which it conducts exchange of energy and information. That exchange means transfer to the environment of the results of activities in the form of products or services for which the entity receives the resources necessary for operation.

The environment analysis process may encompass general as well as detailed surveys. The goal of the general survey is to identify the environment structure, while in case of the detailed survey, the aim is to conduct the evaluation of its current status and to project its future status. Identification of the environment structure is represented by drafting the list of trends and phenomena that influence a given entity. That influence may be positive and represent an opportunity for the institution or negative and represent a threat to its functioning (*Zarządzanie...* 2005).

The environment analysis results, among others, in the institution operational strategy. It is conditioned, on the one hand, by the external factors (influence of the environment) and the internal factors such as the size, structure and efficiency in using the available resources and skills of the enterprise on the other. The availability of a certain set of resources to the institution in itself does not decide its power and ability to compete. Moreover, possessing certain skills and competences does not determine how they will be used, how the resources of the institution will be used thanks to those competences and what the economic result of the operations will be. For that reason, conducting wide analyses aimed at investigating the efficacy of operations and defining, which of them contribute the most to building the competitive advantage is necessary (Gołębiowski 2001).

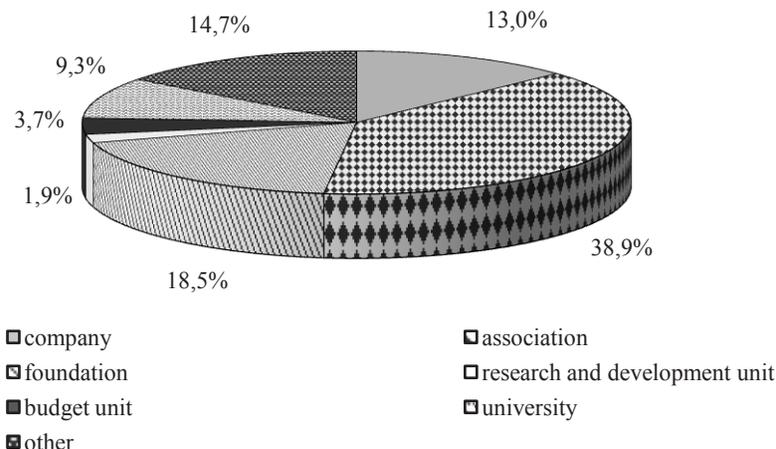
SWOT analysis that represents comprehensive situation analysis synthesising individual fragmentary analyses concerning external and internal conditions of organisation operations is one of the most frequently applied methods in the strategic analysis of entities. SWOT analysis is based on the assumption that external and internal factors that create current and future conditions of organisation operation exert either positive or negative influence on its development potential and strategies of operation. The key to SWOT analysis is the skilful use of identified strength and weaknesses of the organisation as well as the opportunities and threats resulting from the environment influence in drafting the strategy assuring consistency between resources and competences of the entity and conditions of its environment. The logic of operation under competitive conditions requires using and strengthening the strengths, eliminating the weaknesses, using the opportunities in the environment and avoiding threats or neutralising their influence by formulating the appropriate strategy (Gołębiowski 2001).

The paper aims at analysing the environment and internal conditions of operation for business environment institutions in Warmia-Masurian voivodeship. The presented results come from the surveys conducted for implementation of the project *Business Environment Institutions survey from the perspective of the competitiveness and innovation of services provided with recommendations*, developed within the frameworks of the project Regional System of Services – InnoWaMa Network implemented with involvement of the Operational Programme Human Capital 2007–2013 (VIII. Regional Staff of the Economy, measure 8.2 Knowledge Transfer, sub-measure 8.2.2 Regional Innovation Strategies) by the Department of Regional Policy of the *Marshal's Office of the Warmia-Masuria Province in Olsztyn*. The main information source for the preparation this publication were the primary research conducted using a survey method. The basis for an analysis were data collected on two stages.

The first stage was implemented in May 2010 using postal and mailing surveys, which were addressed to the all business institutions in the Warmia-Masurian voivodeship. Complete and completed questionnaires were received from 54 institutions, also the rate of return was 42.9%.

In the study group there were representatives of all legal and organizational forms, but dominated associations and foundations (figure 1). Respondents could add other forms in positions “other”, for example the characteristics of craft, co-operative, business chamber, and economic self-government.

Figure 1. Structure of respondents according to legal and organizational forms



(N = 54)

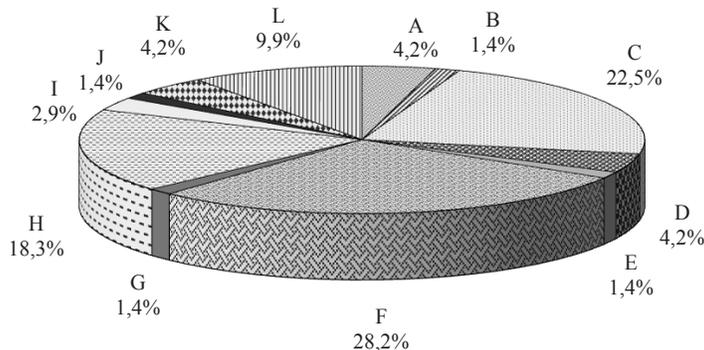
Source: own study.

According to the definition, the legal and organizational forms presented in figure 1, can be divided into the following categories of institutions: regional/

local development agency, scientific and technological park, consulting and training center, guarantee and credit fund, Investor Service Centre, organization representing entrepreneurs, research and development center, business support center, Centre for Innovation and Technology Transfer, technology incubator, business incubator and the others.

Respondents supplemented the group by teaching unit, agency, employment, special economic zone and the loan fund. The structure of the business environment is shown in figure 2.

Figure 2. Structure of the BEI by category of activity



A – regional / local development agency

B – scientific and technological park

C – consulting and training center

D – guarantee and credit fund

E – Investor Service Centre

F – organization representing entrepreneurs

G – research and development center

H – business support center

I – Centre for Innovation and Technology Transfer

J – technology incubator

K – business incubator

L – other

(N = 54)

Source: own study.

Then, in the second stage of research, the institutions with outstanding way of operation and very good standard of services were selected. The method of total points was adopted as an instrument which allowed hierarchy of institutions. The second stage of the study, completed in June 2010, involved employing the technique of direct interviews. The empirical material was obtained from 24 subjects. This phase of the study was crucial for the analysis of respondents BEI, as it allowed for gathering information related to the self-assessment on the impact of institutions on the development of the region, impact on competitiveness and innovativeness of enterprises, as well as the environment, resources, competencies.

Results of own research

Producing recommendations concerning improvements in the functioning of institutions in business environment requires obtaining knowledge on their strengths and weaknesses as well as determining the possible opportunities in and threats to their functioning. That component of the strategic analysis of the BEI was prepared on the basis of the subjected evaluation of both, the proposed options (closed questions) and the information provided by each of the institutions during the interview.

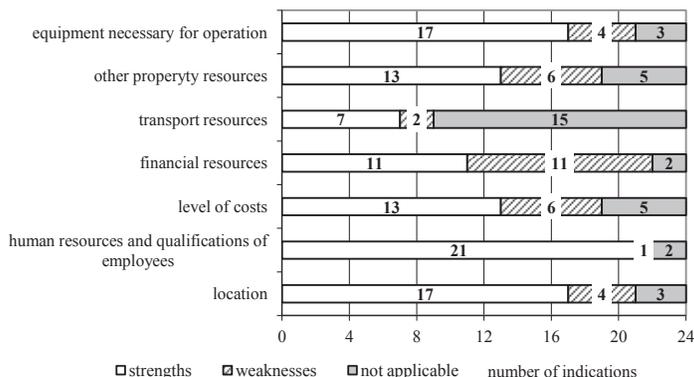
The information characterising strengths and weaknesses of BEI in Warmia-Masuria voivodeship was evaluated in three categories:

- resources,
- institution management,
- services provided.

As indicated by the information in figure 3, the most competitive and innovative BEI in the region in 87.5% (21 institutions) declared that human resources and qualifications of employees are their strengths. Only 2 entities did not present their opinions on that issue, which was a consequence of the fact that they were at the stage of organisation and selection of the personnel. Only one institution operating in Elbląg sub-region declared that resource as representing its weakness.

Equipment necessary for operation (e.g. office equipment) and location were indicated as strength by another 17 BEI. As indicated by the survey conducted, the BEI are trying to minimise their operational costs, which justifies the situation where the level of costs was indicated by over a half (13) of the institutions as their strength. It should be highlighted that the majority of institutions surveyed (15) did not have means of transport among their reSources:

Figure 3. Evaluation of the resources of business environment institutions as their strengths and weaknesses

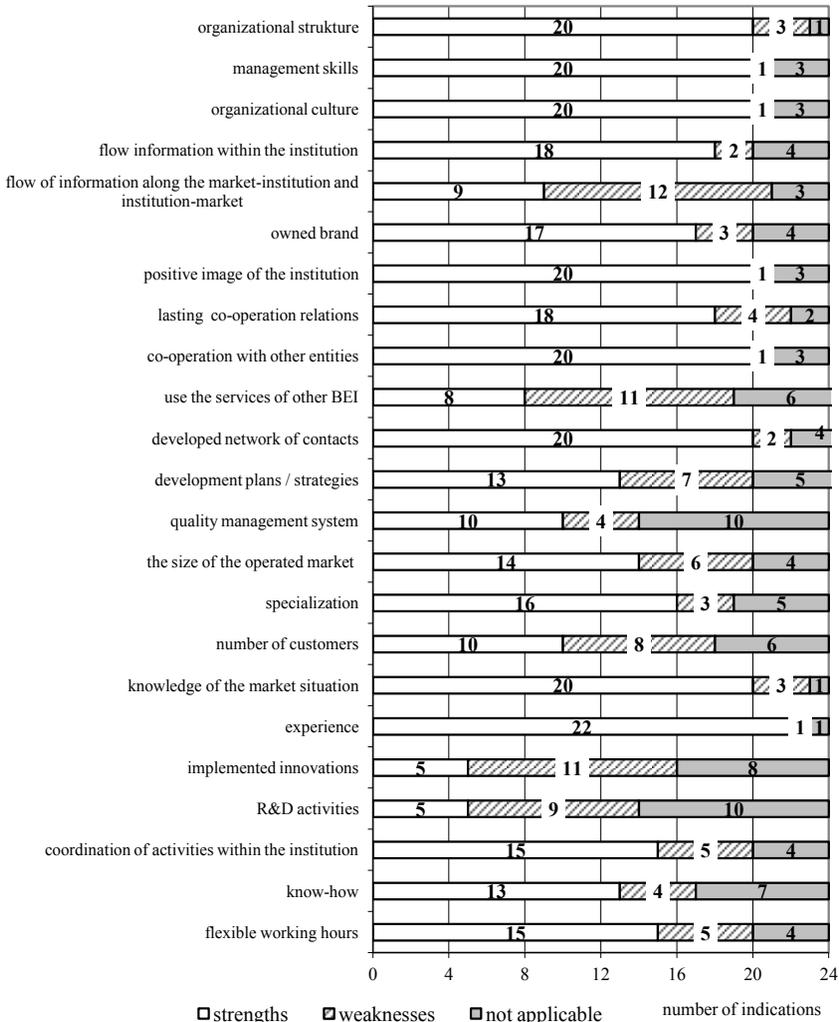


(N = 24)

Source: own study.

The area of management was another subject of the analysis of strengths and weaknesses (figure 3). That area was conditioned, first of all, by the skills of the management. Well-managed organisations function more efficiently, there are fewer conflicts and the activities generate positive effects. As in most cases the interviews in surveyed institutions were conducted with the management of units, the responses to those questions contain a larger element of subjectivity than the other categories.

Figure 4. Evaluation of the management area in the aspect of strengths and weaknesses of business environment institutions



(N = 24)

Source: own study.

In many cases, members of the management had to evaluate their own skills. Experience (22 responses), knowledge of the market situation, developed network of contacts, co-operation with other entities, positive image of the institution, organisational culture, management skills and organisational structure (each of those components was considered a strength by 20 institutions) were the evaluated characteristics which most frequently represented the strengths of the institutions surveyed. Management skills are immensely important for every organisation, and among them the ability to take decisions plays an important role. Frequently, management skills are correlated strongly with the experience.

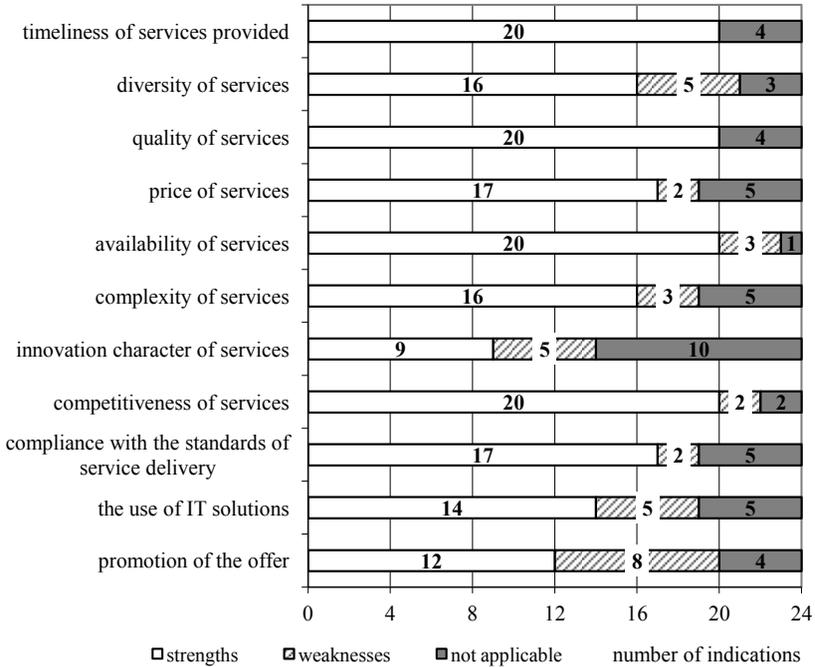
Lasting co-operation relations and information flow within the institution were also the undoubted strengths of the institutions surveyed. That opinion was expressed by 18 entities (figure 4).

Information flow along the market-institution and institution-market lines was considered the weakest aspect in operations of the institutions at that evaluation stage. That opinion was expressed by as many as 12 entities. Additionally, 11 institutions considered using services of other business environment institutions a weakness. This is contradictory to the presented information concerning lasting co-operation relations maintained by the surveyed institutions because 18 of them considered those links their strength. Hence, there is some doubt whether, despite the lasting relations among institutions, those contacts are made sufficient use of.

The last area in the analysis of strengths and weaknesses of the institutions surveyed concerned services provided. It should be concluded that widely understood services provided by the institutions surveyed were as a whole considered the strength of the operations. However, individual characteristics that resulted in formulating that conclusion should be analysed. Competitiveness, availability and timeliness were most frequently indicated as strengths of service activities of the business environment institutions. Such opinions, according to the information presented in figure 5, were presented by 20 institutions each. The low cost of services was also the unquestioned strength of their operations (17 indications) and in case of just 2 of them, a different opinion was expressed. In most cases excellent quality of services is influenced by providing them according to the effective standards and that is why that aspect was indicated as strength by 20 institutions.

Looking at the distribution of responses presented in figure 5 we can notice evident advantage of strengths above weaknesses and although, in case of promotion of the offer and innovative character of services, the advantage of strengths was minimal those two categories should be discussed.

Figure 5. Evaluation of strengths and weaknesses of business environment institutions from the perspective of services provided



(N = 24)

Source: own study.

Reaching new customers is the condition for acquiring new ones, and that purpose is served by promotion. In case of as many as 8 institutions that important component of marketing mix was considered a weakness of their operations. This is closely related to another weakness of business environment institutions i.e. their financial situation. The financial resources available to the surveyed institutions can be allocated to strictly defined purposes resulting from specificity of operations or legal regulations. As a consequence, many institutions experience a shortage of funds that could be allocated to reaching the potential customers with their offer. Implementation of projects co-financed from the European funds within which promotional activities are subsidised represents a certain solution for BEI. The innovative character of services provided is another issue requiring complementary information. The presented data (figure 5) indicates that only 9 institutions considered that aspect a strength of their offer. On the other hand, 10 BEI were not able to present a position concerning that issue while 5 declared firmly that innovation aspect of their services is their weakness.

During interviews with representatives of 24 institutions other characteristics that undoubtedly represented their strengths were defined. They included:

- well-prepared operational strategies for the perspective of the 5 coming years, which cause that the activities implemented by BEI are considered and also specify clearly the development directions of institutions surveyed,
- creativity – manifesting in numerous ideas for expanding (complementing) the activity, e.g. through undertaking business activity; that characteristic causes that the institutions can become independent of subsidies received from public funds,
- good product, being the outcome of studies, which fits the needs of the service users in the best way possible.

The weaknesses are the second area that requires complementing. Among them the following should be highlighted:

- lack of funds for conducting the activities, which indicates that financial barriers limit not only the activities of entrepreneurs but also of the institutions that provide services for them,
- insufficient activity in search for other than the European Union funds, sources of financing their activities.

Business environment institutions are also subject to the influence of their environment – the closer and the more distant one. Changes taking place within that environment have different influence on the situation of BEI. Institutions participating in the second stage of the survey were asked to express their opinions concerning the influence of specific factors on their functioning.

The information presented in figure 6 builds, first of all, the image of threats, which, if they do not have a destructive influence, for sure are arduous for functioning of BEI in Warmia-Masuria voivodeship. Factors presented as influencing functioning of those institutions positively were relatively few.

Lack of the consistent vision of business environment institutions development in Poland was the factor with the strongest negative influence on them according to the respondents. That opinion was expressed by as many as 82.6% of them. A comprehensive approach at the national level, according to which the BEI development goals and directions would be defined and the possible sources for financing their activities would be indicated, would facilitate the operation of that sector.

The policy of local and regional authorities represented other factors which, according to business environment institutions, posed the major threat to their functioning. Each of those factors was indicated as a threat by 14 and 13 respondents respectively. This surely indicates that BEI support mechanisms have not been developed at the local level yet. The information obtained during the interviews indicated that in many cases the local authorities treated BEI as competitors possessing no sufficient knowledge on specificity of their operations. For those reasons, such institutions frequently received no support from the local government, even such simple help as making premises available for their operation. That situation is confirmed by the fact that 10 respondents considered lack

of agreement with representatives of local governments a factor with negative influence on functioning of their institutions. The decisions and actions taken by local and regional authorities have important influence on the operational conditions of entities operating in the region. The policy kind to BEI would represent important support to their operations.

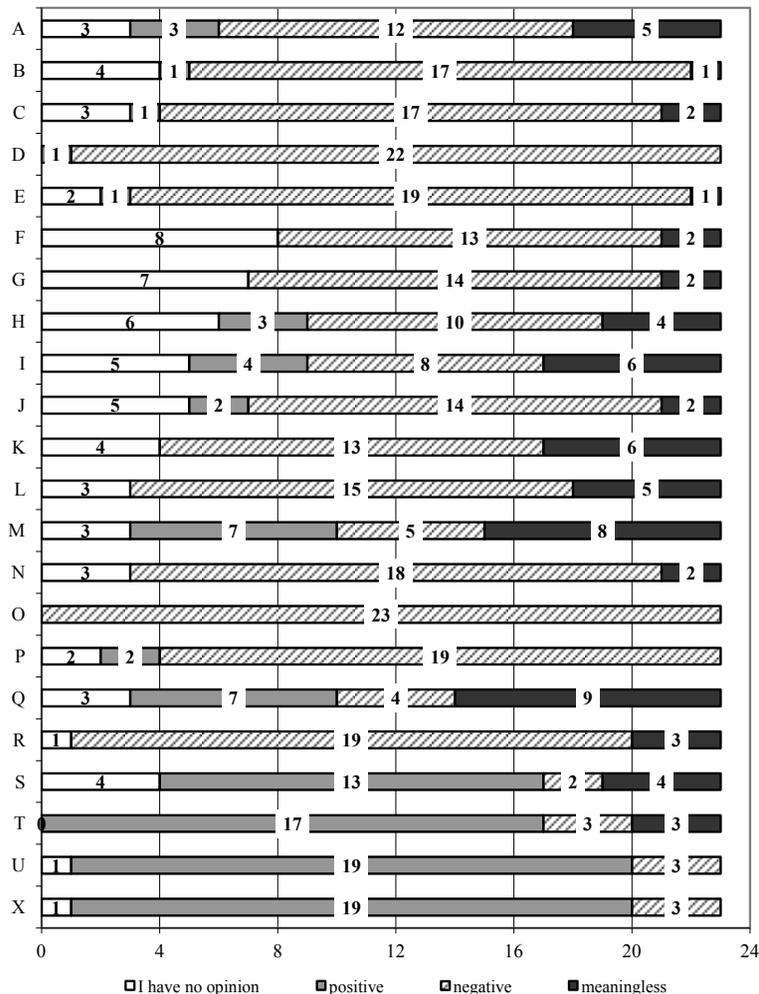
Equally important threats, although of a quite different nature than those presented above, included high burdens to the benefit of the budget (15 negative indications) and unclear, inconsistent and unstable legal regulations (23 indications) although in this case the respondents indicated moderately negative influence in majority of cases. There is no doubt that general economic conditions are important also to the BEI, although it should be highlighted that in that respect, the potential for making changes at the regional level is small.

The proposed catalogue of factors influencing operation of business environment institutions also allowed identifying threats related to the business sector. Among those threats the respondents considered the following ones as the most negative: lack of belief in the SMEs sector concerning positive aspects of cooperation with BEI (19 indications), lack of belief of the SMEs concerning the necessity of implementing innovations (22 indications), poor interest of investors in the region (19 indications).

The presented factors may indicate, first of all, the defective system of information transfer as a consequence of which the entrepreneurs do not have knowledge on activities of BEI and services provided by them (that they could benefit from), and second, inappropriately delivered promotion of BEI activities or lack of such promotion. The respondents also indicated communication problems in their contacts with bodies of public administration.

On the other hand, on the basis of the information presented in figure 6, it was possible to determine the opportunities for the BEI operations, although they were much less numerous than the threats. According to the respondents, the operation of the National System of Services and the scale of the European funds channelled into the sector of SMEs had the most positive influence on the BEI sector (19 indications each of those factors). Furthermore, the membership of Poland in the European Union in itself was considered by 17 respondents an opportunity for development of business environment institutions. Consumer requirements concerning quality of products and services offered by the SMEs also stimulated the functioning of those institutions (13 indications) because aiming at quality improvements in their products or services enterprises use assistance of business environment institutions.

Figure 6. Analysis of factors influencing functioning of business environment institutions



A – lack of systemic support the development of innovative enterprises B – lack of a consistent vision of the BEI development of Poland C – lack of real relationships between business and the science D – lack of belief of the SMEs concerning the necessity of implementing innovations E – lack of belief in the SMEs concerning positive aspects of co-operation with BEI F – bad policy of regional authorities G – bad policy of local authorities H – lack of agreement with representatives of local government I – lack of agreement with other entities operating in the region J – insufficient demand K – shortage of skilled workers L – high burdens to the benefit of the budget M – too intense competition in the market N – incorrect system of information flow between the BEI and the public administration O – unclear, inconsistent and unstable legislation P – uncertainty general economic situation R – poor interest of investors in the region S – consumer requirements concerning quality of products and services offered by the SMEs Q – pro-environment state policy T – membership of Poland in the European Union U – the scale of EU funds channeled into the sector of SMEs X – the operating of the National System of Services

(N = 24)

Source: own study.

Building a slightly wider image of opportunities and threats was possible as a result of direct interviews conducted with the institutions surveyed. Considering the fact that the group of identified threats was not homogenous, to achieve its larger transparency, it was divided into two sub-groups:

1) exogenous threats:

- general economic situation of the country – it caused that enterprises focused their activities mainly on activities aimed at survival and not development and as a consequence the scale of interest in new technologies decreased; unfavourable market situation also caused pessimism of investors, which decreased the inflow of investments into the region;
- effective legal regulations – among them the respondents indicated excessively complex public procurement procedures, level of tax and social insurance burdens as well as the changes in the Polish legislation that according to the institutions were unfavourable and took place too slowly;
- lack of agreement between the Ministry of Regional Development and the European Union on the issue of support to business environment institutions support from the European funds, which may have destructive influence on their financial standing;
- ending programming perspective and related with it Union funds for financing activities of enterprises coupled with uncertainty of solutions in the new financial perspective (2014–2020);

2) endogenous threats:

- policy of local and regional authorities and, first of all, absence of regional level organisations supporting activities of BEI in a diversified way depending on specificity of their operations; entities belonging to the business environment institutions sector are highly diversified in many aspects (organisational – legal form, type of services provided), which causes that it is hard to develop universal solutions able to support functioning of all the entities;
- low level of socio-economic development of the region (manifesting itself in, e.g. still poorly developed technical infrastructure, low level of human capital, low level of wealth of the residents) and excessively slow pace of changes made;
- too low demand for services provided by BEI among enterprises;
- insufficient level of knowledge and preparation of entrepreneurs in the process of preparing the necessary documentation and excessively low level of management skills.

During the research process the following factors representing opportunities for development of operating BEI have been identified:

- the new financial perspective (2014–2020) and related distribution of funds, which might support new services offered by BEI;

- efficient collaboration with institutions participating in managing the European Union funds;
- search by BEI for alternative to the existing ones sources of financing their activities, which could translate into expanding the offer of services provided by them,
- establishing of a BEI operations coordinating unit at the regional level and a network of information exchange among those institutions,
- innovation oriented attitudes, creativity of entrepreneurs and interest in technology development, increase of their business awareness and business professionalism as well as development of ethical behaviours,
- policy of the country and the European Union focused on competitiveness and innovation increase,
- consistent vision and willingness to co-operate among the business environment institutions in the region in agreement with public administration.

Conclusions

Obtaining knowledge on strengths and weaknesses of business environment institutions from Warmia-Masuria voivodeship as well as identification and careful analysis of opportunities and threats to their functioning allow development of improvements in their activities, which might result directly in the increased interest of entrepreneurs in the services provided by those institutions. On the basis of the conducted survey it was established that services provided by them, in particular their availability, timeliness (indicated by 20 institutions) and relatively low costs (17 indications) are their strengths. Insufficient funds for conducting activities and low activity in search for other than European Union, additional sources of financing their activities, were the major weaknesses in operations of the institutions surveyed.

Analysis of the environment, on the other hand, allowed establishing that (next to unclear, inconsistent and unstable legal regulations and uncertainty of general economic situation in the country on which the regional government has no direct influence) insufficient demand on services offered by business environment institutions was an important barrier to functioning of BEI. The arduousness of it was ranked very high by as many as 14 institutions. That is why spreading among the entrepreneurs the knowledge on the nature and role of business environment institutions in influencing the development of business entities positively is so far for stimulating the demand for services offered by the regional business environment institutions. Finally, the number of identified factors representing BEI operations development opportunities was relatively low and the most important among them were the new financial perspective and the dis-

tribution of funds related to it as well as efficient collaboration with the institutions participating in the European Union funds management. Presented research results should not be generalized since no similar studies have been conducted across the country.

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