



Young Researchers and the Problems of Polish Rural Areas

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INTRODUCTION

Villages and their residents have for many years been an important subject of research in Poland. Rural areas (making up 93% of the surface area of the country and inhabited by over 39% of the population) are currently the scene of many economic and socio-cultural changes.

Publications devoted to rural areas refer to various problems occurring there. They refer to transformations in the socio-professional structure of rural areas, connected to among others with the decreasing number of farmers, especially smallholders (e.g. Halamska 2011, 2014; Frenkel 2012, 2014), changes in the agrarian structure, including problems of small, family-owned farms, which are the basic organizational form in Polish agriculture (cf. e.g. Sikorska 2003; Halamska 2005, 2011; Józwiak 2007; Zegar 2007; Górlach 2009; Poczta 2012; Dzun 2014), or opportunities for multifunctional and sustainable development (cf. e.g. Kaleta 2005; Kłodziński 2005, 2012; Wilkin 2010; Błąd 2011; Nurzyńska 2014; Górlach 2013). Researchers also take up issues connected with the social capital of rural residents (Kamiński 2010; Podedworna, Ruszkowski 2008; Starosta 2012; Zajda 2011, 2014; Fedyszak-Radziejowska 2012, 2014), the potential of their socio-political participation (Pankowski 2012; Głuszyński 2014; Zajda 2015), opportunities and ambitions of young people living in rural areas (Szafraniec 2010), processes of demarginalization and creating equal opportunities, including the sphere of education (Psyk-Piotrowska 2004; Fedyszak-Radziejowska 2005; Szafraniec 2012), transformations in traditionally understood social roles (Michalska 2012, 2013), and changes occurring in the countryside after Poland's accession to the European Union (Drygas, Rosner 2008; Wilkin 2014).

The aim of this publication is to look at the problems of Polish rural areas from the perspective of the young generation of researchers, to show what problems they are interested in and what study methods and techniques they use to describe the phenomena occurring in Polish villages, as well as to analyse the results of their studies and underscore their importance for the development of knowledge concerning the dynamic transformations in Polish rural areas.

With this end in view, we established cooperation with representatives of different fields of study (sociology, ethnography, economy and geography) from renowned academic centres such as Institute of Rural and Agricultural Development, Polish Academy of Sciences (IRWiR PAN) in Warsaw, University of Lodz,

Life Science University of Poznan, Technical University in Warsaw, Institute of Urban Development in Krakow, and Maria Grzegorzewska University. What they have in common is interest in the problems of rural areas and their residents.

The authors of the discussed texts concentrate on various problems. First, they focus on the new model of rural development, very often identified with concepts such as multifunctional and sustainable development, assuming active participation of rural residents in solving the problems which affect them. These issues are discussed in articles by Ruta Śpiewak, Pamela Jeziorska-Biel and Katarzyna Zajda. Kinga Pawłowska describes the strategies of coping with the reality used by residents of marginalized villages, which make it easier and at the same time more difficult for them to adapt to the new model of rural development.

Ruta Śpiewak analyzes the lively discussion on the model of rural areas and farming development, from the 1980's and 1990's and confronts it with the new model. The goal of her article is to present the approach to the analysis of rural inhabitants' attitudes towards the new model of rural development in Europe, a model that frequently appears in the scientific and political discourse. She stresses that the agricultural policy of the European Community led to negative social, economic and ecological effects. The dominating agricultural development model of that time was named an agro-industrial model, and the development concepts were based on the fact that rural development began at a farming homestead and on the farmland and that it ended there as well: that this process was secondary to farming development. She notices that: "The new model, as opposed to the diminishing farming modernisation paradigm, assumes very active participation of rural area inhabitants in the implementation of the development programme. Rural areas may not change without the involvement of their inhabitants, and they ought not only to be aware of the course of changes but also to be willing and able to participate in the transformation". Her research was conducted in 2010, in the area of the Local Action Group "Kraina Rawki" partnership, a local structure that emerged in 2006 for the implementation of the LEADER programme, the exemplary method of implementing the new rural development programme. The partnership was populated by 35 thousand people and encompassed 6 communes. Locating the field research in this structure allowed to utilize a variety of local resources, such as local activity group strategic documentation, documents of the communes being part of the partnership, websites, the results of a questionnaire conducted by the board of the local activity group, research conducted as part of the ALDETEC programme, or analysis of the financial and merit reports from the programme's activity. The data were collected through unstructured interviews with the local leaders and questionnaire interviews with a sample of 200 people. The main conclusion from the analyses is that the new rural model is accepted only in fragments and that rural inhabitants from Local Action Group "Kraina Rawki" are not yet ready to face the requirements of the new rural areas development.

Pamela Jeziorska-Biel focuses on the implementation of “Village Renewal Programme” in one of the Polish voivodeships – Lodz Voivodeship. She presents the results of research carried out in the period: 2013 – 2014 which goal was to answer the following questions: 1) What are the characteristics of the Rural Renewal Programme, implemented in the municipalities of the Lodz region in the context of sustainable development? 2) What are the functions served for sustainable development by Rural Renewal programmes of these areas and which components are strengthened (social, economic or environmental)? In the first part of the article she analyzes the development of the Rural Renewal Programme in Europe (taking into consideration the assumptions of the sustainable development). In the second she discusses the implementation of the programme in Lodz Voivodeship (which is quite specific because of its inhabitants’ low level of social capital). She stresses that “the Rural Renewal Programme in the scale of the entire region of Lodz (during years 2004–2006) was aimed mainly at the social sphere, less on the economic (only 5 projects related to renewal of the technical infrastructure and spatial), and the least – natural (only three projects related to health strict environmental values municipality)”. In her opinion the most important in this programme were: the integration of the communities, their activation by creating a forum for the exchange of experiences, recreational space for the children and adolescents. In the conclusion she asks whether the Village Renewal Programme contributes to the sustainable development of rural areas or just specific parts of it and notices that “In the light of the results presented it should be stated that in the municipalities of the Lodz region Rural Renewal supported only one area of development”.

Katarzyna Zajda focuses on the social innovations in Polish rural communities define as the development and implementation of new ideas (products, services and models) to meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations. She stresses that extensive literature concerning innovations has been dominated by economic perspectives and discourse concerning relations between innovations and economic growth and that social innovations are not commonly identified among other kinds of innovations as those that are neither directly associated with the market nor require considerable financial expenditure. The aim of her article is to present the determinants of social innovations in the context of characteristics of Polish rural areas, with particular emphasis on the social capital of their inhabitants. She analyzes selected characteristics of rural residents’ social capital (their level of social trust, readiness to work voluntarily for their own environment, willingness to support strangers, level of social activity etc.) and the mechanisms of stimulating social innovations in rural areas. Taking into consideration methods of activating citizens to participate in the creation and implementation of social innovations, presented by Davies, Simon, Patrick and Norman, she is of the opinion that the weakness of some of them is the short time when community members can cooperate. She presents the assumptions of LEADER

method as the one of the methods of generating innovations aimed at changing the relations between the three sectors of key importance for rural development and analyzes the results of the research project: “Structure and determinants of the social capital of local action groups”. Her conclusion is that not all rural areas have a possibility to implement social innovations due to at least three determinants: social perception of innovations as a process reserved for companies with considerable financial capital, little human capital resources connected among others with education or creativity, and a low level of social capital.

The text by Kinga Pawłowska is devoted to the post-transformation traumas of Poles living in rural areas. But contrary to the traditional narrative forms, referring to the categories of exclusion and marginalization when describing the consequences of the systemic transformation, Pawłowska strives to perceive the reality of rural area inhabitants from the perspective inspired by Michel de Certeau’s work, referring to the ideas of “strategies and tactics” and to the concept of new cultural history. She tries to reconstruct “the ‘tactics’ of some inhabitants of the contemporary Polish villages, which are all kinds of ways of ‘coping’ in the system that the inhabitants apply. Also, they are the ones that are expected by the power-holding ‘strategists’”. She underlines that a relatively broad spectrum of the choices made by the villagers can be observed – those in line with the ‘system thinking’ as well as those that oppose it. The material used in the article was gathered by Pawłowska herself in two villages in Mazovia region in Poland. Analyzing the behavior strategies of inhabitants of two selected communes, the Author notices that they try to cope with the changing reality in various ways. According to Pawłowska, their tactics come down to three basic ways of action, which she describes taking into consideration the differences in ages and life situations of the respondents.

Sylwia Michalska and Ilona Matysiak focus on the subject of transformations in rural residents’ social roles, including rural women serving public roles.

Sylwia Michalska raises the question of how social roles of women living in Polish rural areas have been changing over the last nearly a hundred years. She concentrates on three most important spheres of functioning of rural women: family, professional and social roles, asking what allows these women to broaden the repertoire of roles and go beyond traditional patterns, and what makes these changes more difficult. On the basis of the analysis of literature, diaries written by rural women over the last century, as well as the results of studies devoted to the ways of allocating chores in Polish families, women’s professional and social activities, their involvement in politics and activity in serving public functions, she attempts to reconstruct the changes occurring in the activity of women living in the country. She observes that in Poland the perception of female roles is changing, which is particularly visible in rural areas, as there more traditional divisions of roles connected with sexes have been preserved. The possibility of taking advantage of changes is, however, sometimes limited by internal factors resulting

from mentality, as well as external ones, related to the environment in which the changes occur. The combination of traditional expectations of women and their desire to face new challenges leads to heavily loading female rural residents with duties, and as a result they are not always able to achieve the goals they have set for themselves.

Ilona Matysiak is interested in the factors determining the growing participation of women as village representatives in Poland. Taking into account the assumptions of political elites recruitment (that taking up public functions is determined both by factors directly connected with the individuals themselves and by the characteristics of political structures and roles), she analyzes the socio-demographic characteristics of village representatives, their motivations, and the social perception of the role of village representative. She also points out regional differences between the number of women and men serving that role. Her analyses are based on a qualitative empirical study that covered ten communes located in different regions of Poland (the communes were chosen because of their different proportions of women serving as village representatives and commune councillors). The interviewees were 51 male and female village representatives and 57 persons from local authorities, public institutions and organizations. In the article she presents the function of village representative and rural women's participation in subcommunal self-government and stresses that "The institution of village representative (*sołtys*) has a long and well-established tradition in Poland". She also characterizes rural women's participation in subcommunal self-government and theories of political elite recruitment. Her analyses show that the share of females in the group of village representatives is determined by historical factors, regional varieties in the continua of local communities and "long-time settlement" of their members, attitudes to female and male social roles (including positive evaluation of women serving public roles, especially the traditionally "male" ones).

In the third part of this monograph, we present texts by authors interested in the issue of multifunctional development of rural areas, with particular consideration of development of rural entrepreneurship (dealt with by Magdalena Dej and Adam Czarnecki).

Magdalena Dej describes companies relocation to rural areas in large metropolitan regions in Poland. The purpose of her article is to determine the scale and key characteristics of plant relocation in major metropolitan areas in Poland with particular emphasis on fringe areas of metropolitan areas – especially rural communities (major metropolitan areas in Poland include very large areas still considered to be rural). In her opinion an analysis of the characteristics of attractive rural townships makes it possible to evaluate local resources and their attractiveness to potential investors. Her research shows that the number of companies in fringe areas of major metropolitan regions is on the rise in Poland [...] This is especially true of rural areas located in close proximity to major urban centers and that more

than half the companies in some townships are non-local companies. One of her main conclusion from the research is that “Company relocation is traditionally not a spontaneous process, which tends to involve well-thought out decisions regarding plant site selection”. What makes some townships more attractive than others is special economic zones (which offer tax breaks, tax free periods, and technical infrastructure), business activity zones and tax breaks to potential investors. The very important are also lower real estate prices in suburban areas represent a pull factor, as does investment land availability, good road access, and good transportation links with the urban core as well as other places important to business enterprises, the investment climate in each given township, which include national tax law, local economic considerations, local technical infrastructure, as well as institutional support.

The goal of Adam Czarnecki’s paper is to assess the significance of small towns as sales and supply markets for rural businesses. He describes a qualitative study realised in Poland, merely of the existing economic linkages established by rural enterprises (excluding farms) and their counterparts as well as public institutions, farms and individual consumers from small towns. In his opinion: “the role of small towns as a development facilitator for rural areas has been under constant change [...] small towns are influenced by globalisation, outsourcing of service and manufacturing jobs to low-wage countries, industrialisation of agriculture, large-scale economic and functional changes, increasing social inequalities, service restructuring and negative demographic tendencies”. Author remarks, that many small towns have successfully adapted to the ongoing socio-economic transformations, whereas others are in crisis. In his opinion one of the effects of globalisation has been to shorten the supply chain by reducing the distance and time between its successive links: rural producer – processor – distributor – final consumer. The effect of these changes has been the loss of small towns’ traditional basic functions in servicing the surrounding countryside, and consequently, a decline in the significance of small (local) urban centres as supply, sales and cooperation markets for rural farms and enterprises. The role of a small town as a “transmitter” between main urban nodes and (more peripheral) rural areas has been reduced in terms of social functions, given that globalisation and technological progress have facilitated flows of information, ideas, innovations, behaviour and consumption patterns, and opened new job opportunities or, more generally, influenced people’s lifestyles. In this way, the significance of small urban centres has been increasingly marginalised and they are no longer “meeting places” of the rural and urban society/economy. Czarnecki notices that it is worth to support the functional diversification of a small town in the more advanced/specialised services sector, cause when small urban centres could continue to play an important role for surrounding countryside it could prevent the brain drain of the most valuable human resources, who contribute considerably to the human and intellectual capital of rural communities.

The last article written by Jakub Hadyński deals with the issue of regional competitiveness of rural areas. He stresses that the competitiveness of rural areas is a growing area of scientists' interest. It also attracts more and more attention of the development policy, which relates to the effects of socio-economic and political changes. The main aim of his study is to identify the competitive rural areas at the NUTS 2 level of EU regions based on rural characteristics as well as on the Regional Index of Competitiveness, designated by DG Joint Research Center together with DG Regional and Urban Policy. Moreover, other development indexes were also used to indicate the level of regional competitiveness: EUROSTAT statistical data, covering the 2007–2013 period, along with the American Harvard Business School studies of rural areas competitiveness. The results of his research pointed out great diversification of regional competitiveness and presented the spatial location of territorial units within the EU. Peripheral rural areas located in the eastern and western parts of the EU are the least competitive. They are characterised by low GDP levels that result in the polarization of EU territorial dimensions.

We hope this publication will be interesting for the Readers, introduce them to selected problems of development of Polish rural areas and contribute to cooperation with the Authors of the presented texts.

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