

## EDUCATION AS AN ELEMENT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL AREAS IN POLAND

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### ABSTRACT

This article aims to present the structure of education of inhabitants of rural areas as well as the problem of education of rural youth in Poland. Statistics show that there is a vast difference between the level of education in rural areas and cities, although the difference is getting smaller each year.

Moreover, educational advancement of the rural areas inhabitants, slow as it is, has been accompanied for the last ten years by a change in thinking about whether it is worth educating oneself and about the benefits of education, as well as a change in their educational ambitions and opinions about their own education.

**Key words:** sustainable development, structure education, educational advance

#### Introduction

According to Pearce's concept, sustainable development of rural areas means maintaining a balance between economic, social and ecological objectives, and their fulfilment comes down to, among other things, improvement of the level of education [Zawisza, Kochanowska, 2003].

Thus, this article aims to present the structure of education of inhabitants of rural areas in Poland.

The system change, which took place in Poland after 1989, started a process of transformations from which individual social groups benefited quite asymmetrically. Therefore, for example, the economic situation of Polish rural areas and agriculture, instead of improving, with time has become extremely difficult. In the course of the reforms, there have been no real actions taken to introduce this category of population into the new social and economic system, created from scratch [Buczowski and others 2001].

At the same time, differences between individual parts of Poland, resulting from economic conditions as well as sociological and cultural conditions shaped by history, are becoming more and more clear-cut. Rural areas in Poland are very diversified, and next to wealthier, highly-developed areas, there are poor neighborhoods, also referred to as problem areas [Bacski 2002, Hoiy 2005]. Even within a single voivodeship, there are communes which develop faster and ones which stay behind.

The difficult situation of Polish rural areas has to have an impact on their young inhabitants. The future shape and character of rural areas will depend on their ambitions, plans and attitudes, and in consequence on their adopting certain life strategies. It is on the life decisions of this category that the pace and the scale of transformation and moderni-

sation taking place in the agricultural economy depend [Gorlach, Serêga, Dr<sup>1</sup> g 2003].

#### The problem of education of rural youth

The fact that the structure of education in rural areas of Poland is disadvantageous comes as no surprise. Rural youth often finish their education with vocational schools, sometimes with technical schools.

Central Statistical Office (GUS) data shows a huge difference in the level of education between rural areas and cities, although the situation has been gradually improving over the years. For example in 2004, 45.6% of the rural population and 25.7% of the city population held a primary or incomplete primary education degree (in 2006 it was 40.7% and 23.2%<sup>1</sup>), and higher education, 4.2% and 13.2% respectively (in 2006: 5.4% in rural areas and 17.5% in cities)[GUS 2004, 2006].

However, the educational advancement of Poles, slow as it is, has been accompanied for the last ten years by a change in thinking as to whether it is worth educating oneself and the benefits of education, and in the society's educational ambitions and opinions about their own education. This will be discussed in detail further in this study.

The data collected with the use of a survey conducted by Warsaw Agricultural University (SGGW) in 150 higher education institutions, both state and non-state, indicates that in the year 2000 from 1.8 to 19.4% of youth from rural areas studied there (about 9.5% on average). Results of studies carried out by Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń and Warsaw University provide similar data, which shows that respectively 29.8% and 14.4% of students from small towns and villages study in both the universities [Depta et al. 2001].

It is important to note that even fewer young

<sup>1</sup> In 2006, lower secondary schools were included in primary and incomplete primary education

people from rural families are at, for example, SGGW (less than 8%) [Borecki and Klucicki 2000], and at the Agricultural University in Krakow from 3 to 18% depending on the faculty [Hoiy 2001]. Szafraniec [2002] says that rural students constitute 10% of the total number of students, and peasant students less than 5%.

It is also evident that the problem is not only the youth's lack of interest in taking up higher education, but also the distribution of the remaining levels of education. As Szafraniec [2002] points out, "rural youth study mainly in vocational schools, where they constitute 70% of the social structure of these schools. 25% of rural primary school graduates reach general secondary schools."

Wasielewski [2006] claims, referring to GUS studies, that only every 140<sup>th</sup> peasant child continues on to higher education. Moreover, he asserts that more rural youth go to basic vocational schools, which prepare for basic worker professions (over 36% of the surveyed group), and fewer go to schools whose graduates are entitled to attend universities (27%).

As various publications claim, the percentage of students coming from rural areas does not exceed 2% and only every 120<sup>th</sup> student is of peasant origin, which constitutes only 0.8 % of all students, whereas in the 1970s, the percentage was 17% [Papieř 2006].

Domalewski [2006] presents a slightly more optimistic picture: The vast majority of rural children (66%) wish to continue their education in secondary schools (mainly in general secondary schools) - every third learner sees his or her future in a basic vocational school and only 2% intend to limit their education to acquisition of skills for a specific job. When it comes to peasant children, in most cases they still choose basic vocational schools. Research conducted by the author on students from four age groups in the economic faculty of the Agricultural University in Krakow revealed that the vast majority of the surveyed students were graduates of general secondary schools that came from the country or small settlements. The high percentage of students of this origin (46.3%) is – against the structure of all students – quite surprising, if we compare it to the alarming data on rural youth studying in Poland (about 2%). Most probably, this is connected with the fact that the research covered students from Agricultural University: an institution that would in theory attract more people from the country than from the city [Hoiy 2001].

The percentage of students from rural areas and small towns is also mentioned by Ľmija [1999], according to whom, at non-agricultural universities their percentage does not exceed 10-15%, whereas at agricultural universities, the percentage of students from rural areas is higher. According to this

author: "The demand in the economy for farmers with a diploma is low, which forces the graduates of these departments to take jobs in alternative professions, and thus to broaden their knowledge."

Similarly, according to Putkiewicz and Zahorska [2001], only 2% of students come from rural areas. Despite problems with finding jobs for graduates of basic vocational schools, peasant youth still choose this type of education. Primary schools for years used to make a kind of selection, dividing pupils into those who should continue their education and those who should go to vocational school. Unfortunately, some rural schools, despite the seemingly equal level of teaching, are often not able to prepare learners well enough for them to continue on to education in general secondary schools.

Many politicians are aware (and usually express it during elections) that the change of the occupational structure of rural population is the most important and the most difficult task in the process of economic reforms in Poland. At the same time, for the last ten years, the percentage of full-time students from villages and small towns has been gradually decreasing. However, the absolute number of students (including rural students) has been rising. In 1990, 56 thousand people graduated from universities, and currently 180 thousand. Youth from villages and small towns are the lion's share of students completing paid part-time studies at second-rate private schools [Papieř 2006].

From the point of view of a small town or a rural commune, so far no positive effects of the reform of the educational system have been noticed. It has rather been the opposite. Koraszewski [2000] emphasizes this fact: "Sometimes voices of worry could be heard that vocational schools are completely removed from the reality of the job market and that only a small portion of the young people from rural areas went to secondary schools and hardly anybody went to universities. If the educational reform was going to change this condition, the starting point should have been early learning and a fundamental review of the system of teaching in vocational schools and those that entitle students to continue to technical schools and secondary schools. Because the whole educational reform is in complete chaos, there is absolutely no chance that in the coming few years, rural youth will have better access to higher education or better chances of obtaining quality vocational education at the level of secondary school."

The issues addressed above, together with many other problems rooted in limiting certain subjects, such as foreign language teaching in rural school, as well as the poor equipping of these schools, make it very difficult for rural youth to get admitted to universities, particularly to renowned higher state

education institutions. However, determining the percentage of students coming from rural areas among the total number of students turns out to be a difficult task, which is evidenced by significant differences in the estimates quoted in literature.

As Kamicki points out, "The assessment of the present condition of education in the country is fragmentary and incomplete. The mass media informs us that rural youth constitute 1% of all students. If this were precise, this would mean that for every 1.5 million students, there would be only 15 thousand students from the country. We have 43 thousand villages in Poland, so it is easy to calculate that this would mean 1 student per 3 villages. The situation is bad, but is it that dramatic?" [Kamicki 2000].

In the light of the above opinion, the determination of the percentage of rural students that is found in publications appears to be highly underestimated. It is hard to say where the authors get the information from, even more so because the results of the abovementioned research do not confirm that the situation is that dramatic.

Due to the fact that villages are inhabited by less educated people, who have lower educational ambitions, the educational opportunities of rural children are lower than city children's. Therefore, a consistent program reform of the educational system can be treated as an operation which with time would mean evening out the educational opportunities of children from various circles.

A number of barriers, related to the functioning of the educational system in the country, contribute to the worse situation of rural children (e.g. refusing kindergarten education, less qualified teachers, post-primary schools' poorer educational offer) and barriers connected with the lower level of parents' education and the more difficult financial situation of rural families.

The multiplicity and complexity of cultural, social, economic and organisation and system factors limiting rural children's educational opportunities have to be emphasized. Overcoming these barriers is a long-term process in which many institutions and organisations can play a role. However, the responsibility for primary work in this scope rests on state authorities: self-government and administration.

The choice of post-primary school depends on many factors, starting from the educational ambitions of children and their parents (in CBOS (Public Opinion Research Centre) polls [2002], 36% of the respondents living in the country would like their daughters to complete a master's degree, whereas this kind of

ambition was declared by 60% of respondents from cities of 100 to 500 thousand inhabitants), to the school achievements of a pupil to date, to the economic possibilities of the family.

Talking about the educational opportunities of rural youth, it is worth having a closer look at the educational systems they prefer.

It has been known for a long time that the opportunity for rural youth to obtain higher education is extramural higher education, which despite its fees is, in general, a cheaper form of education than full-time studies. This is because the costs (accommodation, living, learning aids, etc.) that a candidate for higher education would have to bear if studying in a city are very high. Moreover, while studying full-time, one cannot be gainfully employed. However, this is not the only problem for people coming from villages and small towns far from cities. Sometimes, the costs of extramural studies in academic centres are also too high. These costs include mainly transport and accommodation for Saturday and Sunday sessions.

This is why many higher education institutions establish departments and branches, often located in small towns. Such a solution enables the inhabitants of the nearby villages to continue their education and obtain a licencjat degree<sup>2</sup> or inżynier degree<sup>3</sup>, with the opportunity to obtain a master's degree at the parent higher education institution. It is interesting that this form of education enjoys the interest of different age groups. The question arises whether such a form of education is a good way of evening the differences between the country and the city as regards the percentage of people with higher education. Most probably yes, but the doubt arises that the quality of such education will differ from that of the education the student could obtain in a renowned higher education institution in an academic centre.

In the case of children who live in rural areas, there are often other conditions that impact their decision about their education. They are related to the network of secondary schools in a given area, transport possibilities, accommodation in a dormitory, and the costs of transport or living outside the home.

The fact that both in the country and the city there are advantageous changes in the structure of secondary education is comforting; at present, youth prefer general secondary schools to vocational schools. However, very significant differences between the country and the city as regards education are still present. While in the city now,

<sup>2</sup> Licencjat degree – a degree for completing higher vocational course (3 to 4 years) (comparable to Bachelor of Arts)

<sup>3</sup> Inżynier degree – a degree awarded in technical and agricultural fields for completing higher vocational course (3.5 to 4 years) (comparable to Bachelor of Science)

the type of school chosen most often is general secondary school, in the country, the choice of vocational school is still dominant [Domalewski 2006].

A lot of factors contribute to the differences in chances for education between children from rural and municipal areas; however, one should stress the lack of an efficient system of scholarships and social care that would enable and stimulate children from poor families to take up and continue education.

Nevertheless, there are certain forms of support for children and youth from rural areas. These are non-governmental associations and funds that aim to help the poorest, e.g. in the form of a scholarship.

They include: the Zofia and Wladyslaw Pokusowie Rural Youth Education Fund, which cooperates with the Agricultural University in Krakow; the Aleksandra Bakowska Scholarship Fund for Rural Youth; the project called: "Equal opportunities" ("Rywne szanse") Local Scholarship Programs, the Stanislaw Pigon Fund, etc.

It can be concluded that the picture arising from the presented research and educational ambitions of rural youth is fairly optimistic. However, at this point an question interesting might be "do Poles appreciate education?"

Almost all adult Poles (93%) are convinced that education is worth an effort nowadays – slightly more than three quarters (76%) strongly express such an opinion, and one sixth (17%) – with a certain hesitation. A few respondents (5%) see no point in educational efforts in Poland today. The lowest ambitions in this regard are observed among less educated and economically less successful people, e.g. among farmers [CBOS 2006].

Since 1993, the percentage of people who perceived the importance of proper education rose by 15 percentage points, whereas the percentage of people claiming that it is not worth studying dropped by 13 percentage points.

70% of respondents mention the fact that education ensures a high income as the most important reason for taking up education. According to 92% of the respondents, it is easier for educated people to form a career, and for 80%, education enables one to avoid poverty, impoverishment and unemployment. It is interesting that in comparison to 1993, the significance of motives related to employment stability and financial profits as well as an easier life has increased, whereas the significance of "self-developmental and intellectual as well as prestigious and occupational motives" has decreased [CBOS 2006].

## Summary

Pearce's concept of sustainable development, mentioned at the beginning of this study, assumes the realisation of certain socially desirable aims, including the rise of the educational level.

Over the last decade, Poles' educational ambitions have risen significantly, but there are still clear differences between city and rural areas. Many factors contribute to the educational differences between children from rural and municipal areas, such as economic, regional, psychological and social or cultural barriers.

There are no doubts that living in a city gives young people much greater opportunities for development, and, as a result, a better adult life. Easier access to education, lower costs of education, and more options for selecting a desired school are all factors which make the discrepancies between rural areas and towns so clear-cut.

It appears that a solution might be to focus our attention on the situation of small towns, which may become centres of broadly-based development, including in the field of education.

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