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CAN WE TREAT THEMATIC VILLAGES AS SOCIAL INNOVATIONS?

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Summary

The term “social innovation” gained popularity within scholars, however its definitions differ to a large extent; the most promising one says about a change in attitudes and behaviour of a group of people that in relation to the group’s horizon leads to new and improved ways of collaborative action. This paper tries to answer the question whether thematic villages, where the inhabitants jointly decide on a topic and prepare unique

tourist attractions based mainly on local cultural, natural, and social heritage, can be called social innovations. It is concluded that thematic villages fulfill the abovementioned definition of social innovations.

Keywords: Social innovations, thematic villages, rural development, neo-endogenous development

JEL Code: O18

Introduction

The change from sectoral to territorial approach in development strategies caused stronger focus on neoendogenous approach while dealing with rural development (Neumeier 2011). It is said that mobilizing local societies, their creativity and actions is very important, if not crucial, for the success of many rural development initiatives. In this context the term “social innovation” is used more and more frequently, however its definitions differ to a large extent (see for example papers by Neumeier (2011), Poll and Ville (2009) or Edwards-Schachter et al. (2012)). Better understanding of the dynamics of social innovation, their decision points and tipping points could help in understanding why many rural development programmes are successful in some regions, while in the other they are failures, despite dealing with similar financial and physical resources (Neumeier 2011). Although possible sources and outcomes of social innovations were studied in the fields of social entrepreneurship and public policy initiatives, other drivers of social innovations were not present in the research curricula (Cajaiba-Santana 2014). In this respect, deeper analysis of particular social innovations is needed, and in order to do that it is necessary to identify some social innovations.

At the first glance, creating thematic villages seem to be a good example of a social innovation. In such villages the inhabitants jointly decide on a topic and prepare unique tourist attractions based mainly on local cultural, natural, and social heritage. Such identity of a village can lead to better self-perception and higher self-confidence of people engaged in the project, higher evaluation of their own village, and creation of additional sources of income

(Idziak 2011, Czapiewska 2012). This paper will try to give an answer whether thematic villages fulfill the definition of social innovation³.

Material and methods

The paper contains a short literature study on social innovations and description of the concept of thematic villages, followed by their comparison, and is mostly of conceptual character. The analysis is supported by some data from empirical study.

The empirical research was carried out in July 2013 and begun with the initial list of 55 thematic villages, found on a website of a specialist engaged in the promotion of this idea. Searching through the internet and using the snowball method, that is asking every respondent if they have heard of any other thematic villages, the list was extended to 106 names, which probably cover most of the thematic villages in Poland⁴. Representative of each village was called⁵ by the phone and if it indeed was operating as a thematic village, an interview with a list of open questions was carried out (usually with the most engaged person, that is the leader, but sometimes with village administrator, animator from a NGO helping this particular thematic village, or a worker of a local NUTS 5 office). At the moment of the interview there were 78 villages operating as thematic villages; the author of the paper managed to carry out 63 interviews with people engaged in these villages. In the next sections data coming from this survey is clearly indicated.

Research on innovations – a brief history

It was about a century ago when Joseph Schumpeter expressed view that “innovation is the ultimate source of economic growth” (Fagerberg et al. 2013, p.2). However, deeper research on innovations began after World War II. In 1950s and 1960 there were several studies on diffusion of innovation, especially in the USA agriculture (Fagerberg et al. 2013), (Gałęski 1971). At the turn of 1960s and 1970s an interest became focused on the conditions that support technological innovations and their outcomes (King 1984). With decades the topic was gaining more popularity and a shift in research and publications from multidisciplinary towards interdisciplinary approach was observed. Because Schumpeter’s early theories concentrated mostly on innovations done by individual entrepreneurs, research done in the 1950s and 1960s focused mostly on historically oriented case studies of large firms. In the 1980s, however, surveys of many firms of different size appeared, considering also national and sectoral specificity (Fagerberg et al. 2013).

Literature concerning the influence of innovations on economic development is tremendous, with numerous scientific journals dealing explicitly with this issue (for example Journal of Innovation and Business Best Practices, Journal of Innovation and Entrepreneurship, Journal of Innovation Economics and Management, or Journal of Technology Management & Innovation, to name only few). Although there is a commonsense opinion that innovations are good as they influence economic growth, many researchers notice also their darker side; for

³ Some data concerning Polish thematic villages presented in this paper was previously published in Kłoczko-Gajewska A.(2013): General characteristics of thematic villages in Poland, Visegrad Journal on Bioeconomy and Sustainable Development 2013, Vol. 2, nr , pp. 60-63 and in A.Kłoczko-Gajewska, Main features of thematic villages in Poland, Acta Regionis Rurum, Special Issue No.1., 2014

⁴ Student Tobiasz Wiesiolek created in spring 2014 a list of 129 names, including 23 already closed or only planned but not realised and 6 in the making (information from e-mail exchange, master’s thesis in progress).

⁵ In most of the cases the phone number to the contact person could be found on the Internet, in some cases the local administration NUTS 5 office was called in order to find the number.

instance, it is not sure whether profits from growth caused by the innovations will be shared among those engaged in the investment in innovations (Mazzucato 2013). Even stronger statement is given by Soete (2013, pp.134-135), who claimed that “at the broader societal level, innovation does not always represent a Schumpeterian process of ‘creative destruction’ (...) but rather represents now and then the exact opposite pattern (...) benefitting a few at the expense of many with a long-term reduction in overall welfare or productivity growth”, with house electronics getting out of order after shorter time than it used to be to encourage clients to buy these products more often, serving as an example. Even mere change in old organisational forms and practices resulting from certain innovations can have ambiguous effects to the society (Lisetchi and Brancu 2014).

For many years the interests in innovations was either from purely economic point of view, or techno-economic, considering also characteristics of particular technologies. However, after some time it was observed that “innovation is linked to factors external to the firm that provide both a setting as well as encouraging and constraining conditions” (Marceau 2011, p.51). According to Conger (1984) it is more probable that any innovation will be adopted if it fulfils the following features:

1. It is relatively better than presently used methods
2. It is compatible to existing values, past experiences of the receivers, and their needs
3. It is simple to understand and to use
4. It can be experimented on
5. The results are visible to others.

By admitting that innovations are diffused in social context the scientists came closer to the concept of social innovation, which will be described in more details in the next section.

Social innovations

In recent years scientists from various disciplines and policy makers became interested in social innovations. Even though social innovations are marginal in the mainstream innovation studies (Edwards-Schachter et al. 2012), European Commission decided to include it in its ten-year strategy Europe 2020, as one of key features of Europe’s innovation policy. The document contains such issues as citizen participation in public budget decisions, ethically acceptable financial products, and community-based support to elderly people, to name only some (Oeij et al. 2011).

In the literature one can find a variety of definitions of social innovations (Edwards-Schachter et al (2012) give a list of 15, and analyse their key features basing on 76 publications). Unfortunately the term itself “is used in various and overlapping ways in different disciplines” (Pol and Ville 2009). Some authors try to make the definitions intuitive and simple, such as Caulier-Grice et al. (2010, pp 17-18) who stated that “social innovations are innovations that are social both in their ends and their means”, which suggests that they should create new social relationships, while meeting social needs at the same time. Cajaba-Santana (2014) stresses that it is purposeful action leading to social change, and not only solving social problems, that are a distinctive feature of social innovations. On the other hand, there are numerous publications where social innovations are seen rather as publically-led and financed projects to solve social problems, for instance develop certain communities and organisations (see Goldsmith (2010) for many examples from the USA or King (1984)). Other authors focus on changes in a society enabling better absorption of science and technology (Dedijer 1984), (Conger 1984).

However broader analysis of the definitions is beyond the scope of this paper, we can present a brief categorisation of the approaches based on papers by Neumeier (2011) and Bock (2012). Bock distinguishes three main interpretations of social innovations: the social mechanism of innovations, the social responsibility of innovations, and the innovation of the society. As for the first one, the diffusion of any innovation usually happens within social context. As a result, even good solutions might not be accepted if the people are not ready for it – no matter if it is technological, organizational, or any other type of innovation. This refers to the above-mentioned list of factors that rise probability of adopting an innovation. The social responsibility means that the innovations should be socially relevant and ethically acceptable. This statement is somehow weaker than the one given above after Caulier-Grice et al., who expected the innovation to be meeting social needs more effectively than other alternatives. Some authors enumerate fair trade and microfinance as examples of such innovations (Oeij et al. 2011). Finally, innovation of the society means that it is reorganising society, improving it. However, with the last two approaches another problem arises: who is to judge whether a change has positive impact on the society? And should we consider only short-term improvement or long-term changes as well? Such questions (“Is SI always good and does it necessarily generate jobs [...] and improve well-being and“ quality of life? How to measure its effects?) are also present in the literature (Edwards-Schachter et al 2012). And last but not least, if technical innovations can have both positive and negative consequences to the society, why cannot we call “an innovation” a change in behaviour that has both positive and negative aspects?

Coming back to the definitions, Neumeier offers an extensive overview of literature concerning social innovations and generalises that three basic approaches to this phenomenon can be observed (Neumeier 2011, p.53):

1. “An organisation-centred approach in which social innovations are seen as new ways of organising business practices, the workplace or the external relations of an enterprise”
2. An approach putting stress on social change, where social innovations can be understood as “societal achievements that change the direction of social change and that provide improved solutions compared to already established solutions to meet one or more common goals” that are supposed to improve the future of societies.
3. An approach that emphasises “the change in the common goals of a specific group of people”. These include implementations of new ideas concerning change of organising interpersonal activities or societal interactions to meet one or more common goals. Here the goal is the improvement of know-how and organising (in comparison to the existing horizon of experiences), not the social change itself.

Summing up and discussing the relevance of these attitudes, Neumeier defines social innovations as “changes of attitudes, behaviour or perceptions of a group of people joined in a network of aligned interests that in relation to the group’s horizon of experiences lead to new and improved ways of collaborative action within the group and beyond” (Neumeier 2011, p.55). To get more into details, Neumeier describes social innovations as having the following features (see also Figure 1.):

- A change can be called a social innovations if it is a result of collective action, but only if a central critical mass of actors gets involved in the network

- Similarly as in the case of technological or economic innovations, it has to be triggered by an initial impetus (either external or internal), such as an unsatisfied need.
- They successively develop through the process of collaborative acting
- There has to be an aspect of relative novelty from the point of view of the actors involved
- Their material outcomes are solely an additional result of the activeness, while it is the change of attitudes or behaviour that enables the improvement

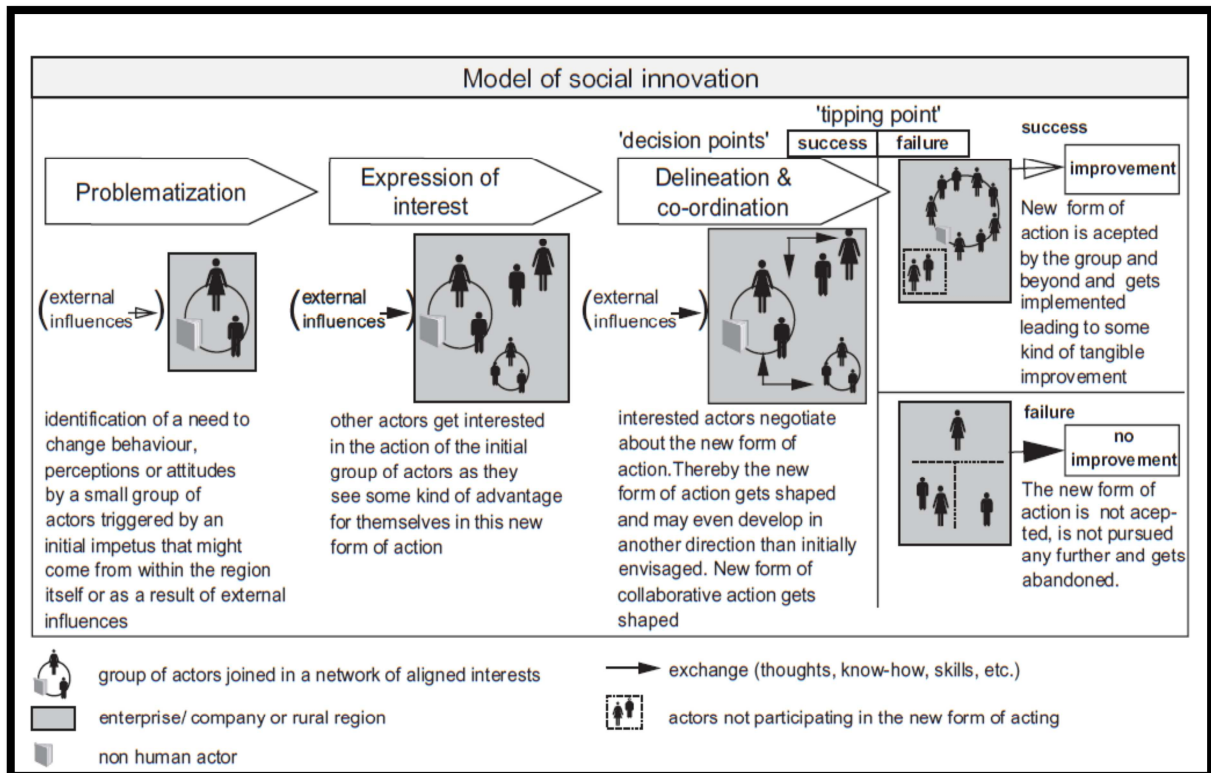


Figure 1. Social innovation process

Source: Neumeier (2012)

It is sure that social innovation “is a highly contextual phenomenon: it depends on the time and place of its occurrence, as represented by specific institutional contexts. What may represent a social innovation in one place at a given time may not be such in another place or another time “ (Martinelli et al. 2003, p.47). Having briefly described what we mean by social innovation, it is now time to describe the idea of thematic villages

Thematic villages⁶

As it was briefly explained in the Introduction, thematic villages are villages where the inhabitants decided to develop their surrounding based on an idea that makes them recognisable and one of a kind. Scientific literature on thematic villages is relatively poorly developed – there are few publications concerning Austrian and German thematic villages (Idziak 2008), and some Polish papers usually describing the theoretical concept itself or containing case studies of few chosen villages.

Concerning Visegrad 4 countries, to the author's best knowledge (supported by consultations with other specialists) there are no thematic villages in Czech Republic, however there are some thematic bicycle routes (webpage of Tématické Cyklotrasy). In Slovakia there is a village that specialises in organising festivals of rural culture that plans further development basing on pears (webpage of Hrušov). In Hungary there is a Needy village painted by Roma artists (webpage of Bodavalenke) and an eco-village in Gyűrűfü that can be described as a thematic village (Borsos 2013). There are also some thematic tourist routes, such as wine routes in Villány region (webpage of Villány Wine Region). Certainly, the most active in this field is Poland, with over 80 operating thematic villages. They are of various size, beginning from 50 to about 2500 citizens, and are situated in most of the regions of the country (see Figure 2.). Some details concerning these villages will be presented below, while explaining the theoretical concept.

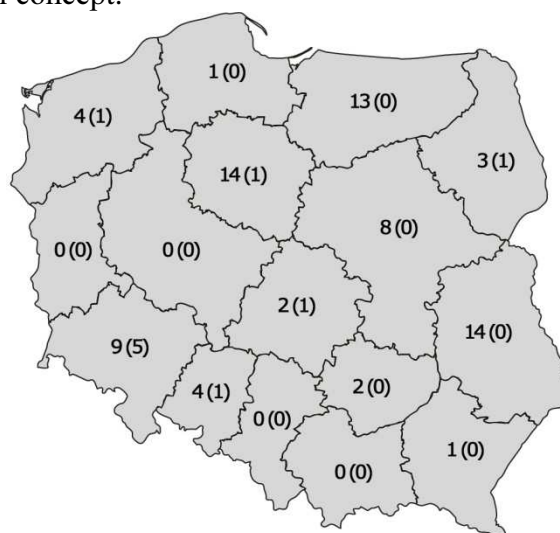


Figure 2. Distribution of active thematic villages in Poland⁷ in July 2013 (in brackets villages in the making and suspended)

Source: own editing

Creating a thematic village usually begins with the idea to do something new, different, make people more socially active, to develop the village; opening for new thinking and gathering a group of initiators. According to the author's study in Poland thematic villages were set up either by already active people who were looking for an idea of how to develop their village, or by people who have heard of successful thematic villages and tried to follow their example. Such initiative usually is taken up in really remote areas, where no other opportunities for development can be found. At the beginning it is very important to find a group of people interested in joint work to make the village more recognizable, as only one person would find

⁶ If not stated otherwise, the suggestions of how to create a thematic village and what are its goals come from the book by Idziak (2008).

⁷ All confirmed active villages, including those that could not be interviewed.

it more difficult to look for new ideas, try new solutions (for example due to fear of being commented as ridiculous and silly), attract clients, and get financial resources. Innovativeness is much more difficult in villages and small towns than in cities, where “relative anonymity encourages experimentation with ideas and shifts from traditional ways of doing things” (Marceau 2013, p.56). Even though quite often it is the villager’s initiative to create a thematic village, in most of the cases it is supported from outside, through offering trainings and workshops, study visits in other villages, etc⁸.

The topic for future development should be associated with a certain product offered by this place. Of course, it is essential that the brand name is widely recognizable and strongly approved by the citizens, otherwise its chances to persist are rather weak. Thus, the first step after the idea of creating a thematic village emerges is to consult it with the villagers. Usually the search for the topic needs a SWOT analysis to be carried out; it is recommended to do this from the point of view of modern economic trends: knowledge economy and creative economy. Searching for strengths and uniqueness requires belief in success and keeping the chosen path. In most of the cases the villages choose the topic based on their traditions (farming specializations, craft, art, sport, customs), the name of the village (if it has a meaning or associates with something), natural conditions, legends, food, but also literature or abstract ideas such as healthy lifestyle or happiness. According to the research carried out by the author in July 2013 in Poland the topics were decided on in the following way: out of 63 interviewed villages, topics for four of them have been chosen based on the village name (angels, adventures, butterflies, apples) and 12 resulted from strong local traditions, where the choice was really obvious to the citizens - usually related to an occupation (pottery, beekeeping), but also remainings of ethnic minority. Brainstorming sessions following analyses of resources and strengths of the villages and their surroundings resulted in the development of 32 topics, and 15 were chosen for other reasons (books, films, private interests of the leader, etc.).

After the topic is chosen, it is important to search for information concerning this specialization: already existing thematic villages, events related to the theme, organizations that deal with similar issues, potential clients, partners for cooperation. Even if the topic has already been chosen by some other thematic villages, the offer would still be unique due to different local conditions.

Later on it is crucial to find support within the village, in local surrounding and even in the whole country or abroad; it includes contacting various local leaders, artists, scientists, students of sociology and culture faculties, and organising study visits in more developed thematic villages. The leaders of Polish thematic villages, when asked, said that strongly engaged group, strong leader and good contact with other people are important success factors (23, 7 and 5 respondents respectively). Most of the organisers took part in study visits while preparing their own concept, and one of them mentioned it as an important factor of success.

At this stage a plan of development has to be prepared: not too detailed, because the perspective changes as the villagers get more experienced and gain new contacts. It is good to organize a bigger event (for example a picnic or a feast) to promote the new image of the village, gain new contacts, try out organizational skills, and get a first visible success. Apparently, in Poland 7 out of 63 respondents mentioned first success as a crucial factor for further development of thematic village. Gradually the village should shift from one-two

⁸ Unpublished results of the author’s research on 63 thematic villages in Poland.

events from time to time to more constant activities. With time, the main effort should be put to actions, while planning is just a support.

The topic should be visible just at the moment when a visitor enters a village (however in practice is not always so). These can be welcome boards, house numbers painted in a special way, and pictures made of flowers. In Poland in ¼ of interviewed villages information boards were prepared, and similar amount of villages prepared decorations related to the topic; among these one could find welcome boards, house numbers painted in a special way, and pictures made of flowers. In 14% of the villages more advanced premises for tourists were built, including a blacksmith shop, a thatched hut, and a large dinosaur park.

The first impression should be supported with live role playing games (RPG), quizzes, competitions, workshops, and similar services. Sometimes there are surprising ways of using old equipment in a new way, such as decorating old tractor as a romantic vehicle, etc. In Poland in two of the interviewed villages there was intentionally no offer for tourists and the activists concentrated on development of the village itself. The remaining ones prepered some tourist offer; most commonly offered services are presented in Figure 3.

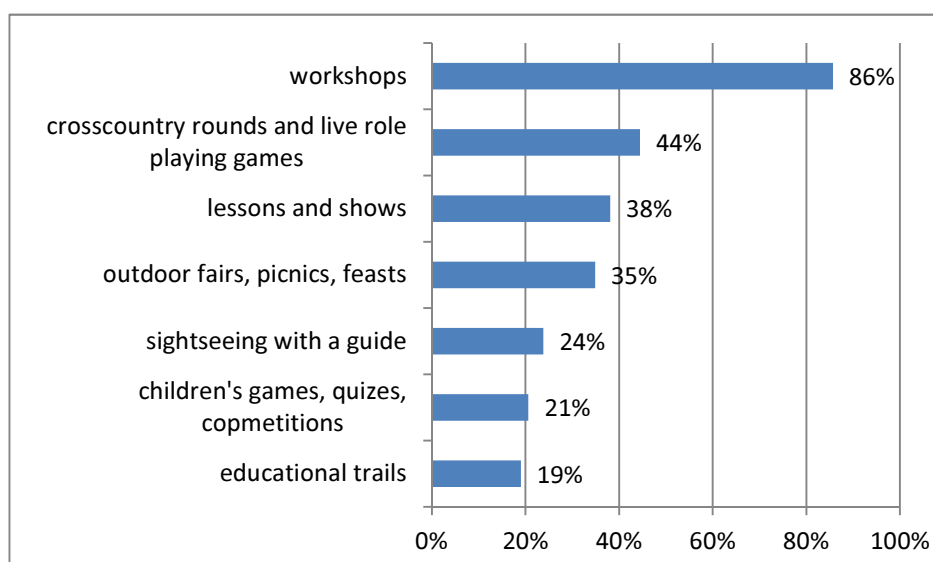


Figure 3. Main tourist offer of thematic villages in Poland in 2013

Source: own editing

In the offer of most of the villages there are workshops of different kinds: preparation of traditional food (making butter and cottage cheese manually, baking bread and various cakes), craft (pottery, making souvenirs of various natural materials such as straw, stones, bones, etc), old-fashioned sports (bows, cannon shooting), and many others. While some of the workshops are strongly connected with the main development topic, in some others the connection is hardly visible. Almost half of the villages offer cross-country rounds or live role playing games; in some of them there is a widely advertised annual event where many citizens dress up for strange creatures (witches, dwarfs, angels, hobbits, etc).

Lessons and shows can be found in almost 40% of the villages and they take a variety of forms, such as a show of a real blacksmith, visiting two cowsheds: a traditional one and a very modern one, walking educational trails, finishing or participating in multimedia lessons about nature. Outdoor fairs, picnics and feasts for tourists are offered in a similar number of villages – either in certain days of the year or when ordered by a large group. In some of the villages

the range of offered services makes an impression, while in the other ones there is a focus on a certain type of activities or the offer is in the making.

In most⁹ of the thematic villages after some time people become more active and self-assured, they feel more recognisable and proud of their village. They learn how to be active, train organizational skills, and how not to be afraid of implementing their ideas. Trainings offered to the villagers should concentrate on learning by doing and experimental learning; it is essential to stimulate their creativity, as it leads to innovations. Their perspective changes to a large extent. Personal in-depth interviews in three chosen thematic villages in the north of Poland revealed, that choosing a topic for development is a strong incentive to look for new ideas related to it.

In order to develop in current economic environment, villages need partnerships – not only within some territorial borders, such as in the LEADER+ program, but also expanding beyond their closest neighbourhood, but related to the topic of interest. Such partnerships, or networks of cooperation, are usually less formalized and more flexible than formally set action groups. Indeed, in the course of work above 1/3 of Polish thematic villages gained new external contacts: with other thematic villages, other associations (for example local action groups), and in few cases also with universities and scientific institutions (those needing specialist consultancy, such as medieval village, dinosaur park or specialist herb cosmetics).

Discussion and conclusion

Let us now discuss how the thematic villages fit into the scheme of social innovations. The first stage of implementing social innovations is the problematisation. It begins with a need for change in behavior, where people are looking for ideas of how to develop their remote village, create job opportunities and activate local society. The trigger is the idea to work jointly in order to change something – it is either external (a successful example of thematic village or a training organized by local NGO) or internal (a group of activists looking for ideas).

The second stage is the expression of interests, which in the case of thematic villages means finding a group of people interested in joint work to implement the idea, looking for inspiration and organising first events under the brand name, getting support from other villagers. It gradually shifts into step “delineation and coordination”, where initial idea is coming into life, modified by the actors involved. Few or more months after the idea is implemented it becomes clear whether the innovations is accepted – in several villages the attempt to become a thematic village failed, while some of them develop quite well. In most of the villages the change of attitudes is clearly visible: people become more active, self-assured, gain new contacts outside the villages. With each successful thematic village the idea becomes more popular, spreading around the country.

As Neumeier pointed out, among the features of social innovation one can find step-by-step development through the process of collaborative acting, which is essential for such initiative as thematic village (learning by doing). Moreover, (exactly as in the Neumeier’s description) the idea is new from the point of view of the villagers. At the beginning it can even be shocking and beyond their imagination; one of the key success factors is to make them believe in extraordinary ideas and make them fully involved, looking for new use of old things. The most important outcome is the change of the villagers’ attitude – improvement of their self-

⁹ In my research ¾ of analysed villages.

esteem, activeness, cooperation, and sometimes changes in the look of the village or additional income.

To sum up, thematic villages fit well into the definition of social innovations. The next step would be identifying decision points and tipping points in order to see why some such initiatives are successful, and some fail.

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