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FUNCTIONS OF RURAL AREAS AND THEIR DEVELOPMENT

Abstract

The article contains an overview of rural areas' functions according to different criteria and an analysis of changes of these functions in the context of rural areas' development. Declining role of agriculture with the growing role of other economic functions in these areas is accompanied by the growing importance of social and environmental functions. This is reflected, inter alia, in the development of settlements in rural areas, increasing ecological awareness, for the sake of landscaping and biodiversity, and in the development of technical and social infrastructure and the activity of local communities.

Introduction

Rural areas are often thought of as the bastion of tradition, immutability, agricultural mono-functionality and constancy. Changeability and development are connoted with industrialisation and urbanisation. But this is only a long-time outdated archetype. Such approach refers to the scale and pace of changes considered from various perspectives of functions of rural areas, but also differently understood structural changes. "Sweet village! peace and joy's retreat!"¹ – as said J. Kochanowski – is now only partly true. The widespread instability, which is typical of post-modern times, concerns also the countryside. This is manifested, for instance, in the difficulties in definition of the term "rurality" or "rusticity" (Halamska M. 2012).

Development is understood as a process of quantitative and qualitative changes in the desired direction. Thus, not all changes taking place in rural areas can be read as signs of development. The question arises: how beneficial these changes are? But assessment thereof is not easy at all, which is linked to difficulties in selecting the criteria for assessment of suitability of the direction of change process.

¹ Translation from *Wybór Poezyi Polskiej – Specimens of the Polish Poets with Notes and Observations on the Literature of Poland* by Sir John Bowring.

It is different when we assess the benefits of changes from the perspective of an individual (subjective), from the local, regional and general public perspective or from a short- or long-term perspective, economic, social or environmental perspective, etc. Difficulties in assessing development stem also from the impact – and not only of cause and effect nature – of different economic, institutional, technical, etc. subsystems. Changes in rural areas are also a derivative of civilisation and cultural changes manifested in the general level and quality of life, not only on the local or even national scale. Hence, rural development in the sense of causes and effects is problematic not only for the rural residents.

This paper focuses on the assessment of changes in individual functions of rural areas and the interrelations between them, taking into account the production function above all. The analysis is based mainly on literature sources, departmental reports and analyses, and statistical data. It especially concentrates on peripheral rural areas, which cover most of the territory of the Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodeship.

Typology of functions of rural areas

In general and simplified terms, the countryside is everything that is not city. But one village is not the same as the other, which springs not only from the size of the very villages – e.g. there are villages in the Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodeship with no residents (only the name remained) or disappearing villages, with one or few inhabited houses, and there are villages whose population figures exceed some towns. Villages are also different because of their location. This refers to accessibility, natural assets, urbanisation level of the area, etc. Rural areas are traditionally associated with the agricultural function, though. But the importance of this function, concerning production of food and food raw materials, decreases in favour of the non-agricultural production functions (e.g. energy materials, non-agricultural economic activity) and especially in favour of public functions. The utilised agricultural areas (UAA), i.e. rural surface used to perform the agricultural production function, gradually decrease, which means that an increasing proportion of rural areas is being taken over by other functions. The number of people living in rural areas increases but, at the same time, drops the number of people professionally active in agriculture. These are only some manifestations of the functions of rural areas and changes thereof.

The functions of rural areas can be broken down into types by different criteria. These include, for example:

- natural functions, including environmental, landscape and ecological attributes of the areas;
- anthropogenic functions generated by rural residents and linked to settlement, buildings, infrastructure, economic activity, social and cultural sphere.

The following can be also mentioned:

- commercial functions, i.e. market functions, covering not only markets of agricultural products but also markets of different services, products and cultural phenomena, leisure, contact with nature, etc.;

- non-commercial functions concerning self-supply in terms of production and consumption, but also public space functions influencing the aesthetic experience, meeting the transport needs.

In synthetic terms, the list of functions of rural areas is as follows (Wilkin J. 2005):

- economic functions, both commercial and non-commercial, concerning not only agricultural production but also other, more and more differentiated economic activity performed on these areas;
- environmental functions, resulting from the use of natural assets in production processes and for communal purposes (soil, water, air, timber, animals, herbs, etc.);
- social functions linked to broadly-conceived living conditions of the population inhabiting rural areas and concerning satisfaction of living, educational, cultural, health, political and other needs;
- cultural functions linked to preservation and development of cultural traditions of rural areas underpinning the local, regional and national identity.

M. Błąd (2010) made a general identification and systematics of cultural functions of agriculture and villages by listing functions concerning:

- landscape conservation and preservation;
- architecture (land development, buildings and structures, design, etc.);
- agricultural production activity (e.g. biodiversity, forest ratio, fruit farming);
- culinary traditions (traditional products, eating habits);
- non-agricultural rural manufacture (folk products and costumes, handicraft, craftwork);
- folk ceremonies and art.

Other functions of rural areas can be specified in a similarly detailed fashion.

Functions of rural areas can be also considered from the perspective of the type of goods provided by them and thus the type of needs that they meet. J. Wilkin (2010) names the following types of public and substantive goods provided by agriculture:

- environmental goods – biodiversity, rural landscape, soil quality, water regime;
- economic goods – food security and safety, energy security;
- social and cultural goods – economic and social vitality of villages, enrichment of the national culture, development of local, regional and cultural identity.

Individual functions are interrelated by means of cause and effect relations of synergetic (e.g. better environment – better quality of life) and/or competitive nature. The latter are the clearest between environmental protection and activity in the field of production, mining and investment, especially in road engineering, hydraulic engineering and public utilities. Sustainable development of rural areas requires reduction (elimination) of conflict-inducing factors and support for desired cumulative effects (synergy).

The contemporary general classification of the functions of rural areas captured in graphic terms covers (Wilkin J. 2010):

- green functions concerning management of land resources, animal rearing, biodiversity, ecology pertaining to plants and animals;
- blue functions linked to the use of water resources, flood prevention and disappearing of water, generation of water and wind energy;
- yellow functions concerning cohesion and vitality of rural areas, living conditions, meeting the social and cultural needs;
- white functions pertaining to food security.

The functions of rural areas could be probably classified according to other criteria that were not considered before. The multiplicity of criteria follows from diversity of functions fulfilled by rural areas. These are, for example, internal functions referring to the very rural areas, but also external functions fulfilled by these areas for closer and more distant economic and social surrounding. The above-mentioned functions exist in proportions and interdependencies that are differentiated in time and space. For instance, the importance of non-production functions is different in attractive natural areas, which include the Warmińsko-Mazurski region, and different in urbanised areas. These functions are connected by means of different restrictive or supporting ties. The performance of these functions contributes to forming the living and working conditions, the status of the natural environment, economic and social structure, settlement networks, technical and social infrastructure.

The functions of rural areas were synthetically captured in many economic and sociological analyses (Falkowski J. 2010). However, because of methodological problems linked to the selection of assessment criteria and measures of meeting them in aggregated terms, the analyses often concern only individual functions or selected aspects of the functions. Therefore, attempts at improvement of the research methodology concerning synthetic capturing of the functions of rural areas are highly valuable (e.g. Zawalińska K. 2010).

Rural development

It is as impossible to perceive the functions of rural areas solely in terms of the production function, as to perceive their development exclusively in the economic context. Although economic development has extensive implications concerning the other functions of rural areas, when considered separately it fails to reflect the rural development in holistic terms. Development of these areas also has its unidentifiable ties to the surroundings, i.e. to the level of socio-economic development of the country and beyond. The rate and directions of rural development are affected by a complex web of many factors, including (Niedzielski E., Rzeszutek J. 2010):

- historical and cultural conditions that formed, e.g., the area structure of farms, settlement network, rural architecture, attitude towards tradition and introduction of changes, etc.;
- political factors, which is clearly visible after system change in our country, impact of the national and common European agricultural policy;

- technological and production changes associated with the use of chemicals, mechanisation and computerisation of processes, biological progress, change in manufacturing processes;
- natural factors linked to the quality and role of the natural environment and geographic factors referring to the spatial location, landscape features, landform;
- social and demographic factors concerning population density, occupational structure, educational attainment, level of life.

Cumulative impact of these factors, differentiated in space as regards the role and strength of impact, causes differences in the level of development of the countries, regions and local communities. These differences follow from natural reasons (environmental, geographic, historical), but they often take on the form of dissonances resulting from the impact of anthropogenic factors.

Rural development is expressed not only in the growth in the quantity of goods and services meeting the needs of residents of the areas but also in quantitative and qualitative changes concerning:

- growth in the level of income linked to the consumption model and life quality;
- structural transformations in the economy, infrastructure and areas, which are connected to the development of non-agricultural economic activity in rural areas and thus the occupational structure of rural population, biodiversity, conservation of landscape assets;
- counteracting economic and social marginalisation and depopulation of rural areas;
- technical and technological development of manufacturing processes but also households, including access to IT, access to public services, application of modern production technologies.

Assessment of meeting the expectations regarding the level of performance of the aforementioned development objectives is relative. This is because, for example, the requirements and expectations of traditional food producers or organic agriculture are different from those of industrial agriculture, they are also different in typically agricultural areas, etc. This development should, then, refer to the prevailing function of the area, but taking into account its interrelation with other functions, which can be referred to the concept of the so-called “rooted markets” (Jasiński J. et al. 2014). This pertains to areas which are endowed with a special type of a factor (product, skills of residents, landscape, activity) that can become the basic function of the area and its development. Such a factor can have its source in the natural or externally stimulated processes. If the identified and appreciated resource is appropriately used, it can form grounds for development of the given area, affecting all its functions.

The assessment of the level of development of rural areas can be done by referring to individual, aforementioned, determinants of the development. However, it is difficult to prepare an aggregated assessment on a local scale, which at the national and regional scale is done based on the value of the Gross Domestic Product. In general, this development is expressed in the improvement in the standard of living on the given area, which is influenced by factors of the following nature:

- material, concerning the economic development (linked to the number and trade and size structure of business entities), provision of the area with technical infrastructure, availability of jobs;
- institutional, concerning the number and structure of public institutions, NGOs and efficiency of their work, and social infrastructure;
- organisational, expressed in the efficiency of operation of markets, institutions and infrastructure, efficiency in management, active citizenship, communication and information flow.

Sustainable development, standing for the difficult to achieve complementarity of individual functions of rural areas, consists in simultaneous meeting of the criteria of economic, social and environmental order. Internal cohesion of the individual spheres of operation of rural areas has to be accompanied by balance between these spheres, because there is always a factor minimally restricting the possibility to use other factors, limiting the intensity of development objectives, in all development activities. But the real problem is to prevent creation of new or limit the impact of the already existing development restrictions, at the same time, keeping the balance between economic, social and environmental functions.

Changes in the functions of rural areas

Quantitative and qualitative changes within individual functions of rural areas and interrelations between them picked up great speed after the system change in our country, especially after Poland's accession to the European Community. The scale and scope of changes in rural areas vary in space and as regards respective functions. The clarity of these changes is also diverse. Multifunctionality of rural areas, considered in the context of their development follows from coherence of the multifunctional development of a farm, agriculture and rural areas as a whole, in connection with the idea of sustainable development of the country. Rural areas cover over 90% of the country's area and agriculture uses only ca. 60% of the surface; hence development of these areas is not only development of agriculture (Wilkin J. 2010). Economic functions and more broadly – economic functions of rural areas, do not refer solely to agricultural, forestry or fish production. The diversity of economic activity in rural areas clearly increases and the spatial range of these functions is highly varied, at the same time. Although the share of agriculture in employment and generation of domestic product has dropped systematically for years, this does not mean that the function disappears. As a result of technological changes and biological progress these trends are also clear in Poland. This in particular concerns the share of agriculture in GDP generation (3.5% in 2012). The changes in employment progress slower, mainly due to the high level of hidden unemployment which largely stems from the overall situation in the labour market. The development of non-agricultural entrepreneurship, despite many programmes and political declarations of its support, faces various barriers, including these following from limited purchasing power and fragmentation of local markets as

a derivative of low income of rural population. In regions of fragmented farm area structure a large part of them fulfils social functions (self-supply) and has very limited market contacts both on the side of supply (lack of capital expenditure, limited consumption) and sale (sale at marketplaces or roadside sale). Thus, only a part (approximately one-tenth) of the general number of farms decides on the volume of agricultural production. The agricultural function of rural areas meets an important role in poorly urbanised regions with a large share of large-area farms, which include also the Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodeship. The high efficiency of these farms is linked to high labour productivity, thereby decreasing demand for labour. For example, employment in state-owned farms 25 years ago amounted to 14-15 people per 100 ha of UAA and at farms created on their basis – 2-3 people per 100 ha.

The employment structure in rural areas undergoes a process of deagrarisation that is manifested in decreasing share of people working in agriculture (12.1% at the end of 2013). Although the overall population figures for rural areas grow, the employment in agriculture drops. In 2013, out of all rural residents 1.77 million worked in agriculture (in 2003 it was 2.3 million) and 4.3 million worked outside of agriculture (in 2003 – 2.9 million) (Raport... 2014). A reduction in the number of people employed directly in agriculture is accompanied by an increase in employment per 100 of UAA, which results from more rapid loss of land resources than labour resources and increase in the level of hidden unemployment. This phenomenon is a consequence of a shortage in the number of non-agricultural jobs in rural areas and beyond. This is probably caused by migrations from rural areas to urban areas and foreign migrations, especially of the young people aged 25-29 that enter the labour market. The diminishing role of agriculture in rural areas is apparent not only in management of labour resources, but also land resources. In 1989-2012, agriculture lost ca. 3.9 million ha of UAA (Raport... 2014; Dzun W., Musiał W. 2013). A considerable portion of agricultural areas is left fallow or set aside, changed their function (e.g. self-afforestation) or is seemingly cultivated only to meet the requirements for the EU payments. The dwindling demand for land as a means of production is caused by popularisation of highly efficient technologies typical for industrial agriculture which is often at odds with the natural (environmental) functions of rural areas. This not only refers to the animal welfare, monoculture of crops or negative ecological and health impact of chemicalisation, but also the negative effects for the landscape, status of waters and biodiversity.

The functions of rural areas are affected by civilisation and cultural changes. The former concern material, organisational and institutional conditions of life, and the latter the aims and values pursued in life. Of course, the changes taking place in the countryside in this regard are largely a derivative of changes throughout society. On the national scale, and also Europe-wide, increasingly more often the countryside starts to be perceived not only as a production area but also an area of creating cultural otherness, possibility to meet with nature

and as an area to be bought and commercially colonised (Sulima R., Podgórska J. 2014). A move from the city to the countryside is gaining in popularity. At present, newcomers from the city represent 8% of the rural population, and ca. 4% of urban residents would like to move to the countryside (Raport "Polska wieś 2014"). This is a spreading phenomenon of two-home families or double addresses of temporary residents of villages and cities, often quite removed from each other (Heffner K. 2012). Escalation of the process is evident in the villages of the Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodeship and not only, where there is a growing number of houses whose owners, often from remote cities, come to live in them from time to time to benefit from interaction with rurality and nature. There are also many examples of permanent migration of urban residents to the countryside, especially in gminas (municipalities) bordering on cities. Consequently, the urban and rural lifestyles unify. This mingling of urban and rural population, change in aims and means of life, modifies also the size and structure of the demand for market goods (economic functions) and also recreational, educational, natural, cognitive and other goods. This can be exemplified by development of tourism or agritourism, which takes on the form of sale of services, but, at the same time, allows meeting intangible needs, and satisfaction thereof can also be marketed: e.g. getting to know the folklore on the occasion of varied cultural events (which also earn money), organisations of "arts and crafts" fairs, historical re-enactments, setting up thematic villages, establishment of botanical and zoological gardens, organisation of sightseeing tours. The services offered by resorts located in the countryside, hotels with additional functions (spa, swimming pools, tennis courts, theme parties, etc.) are also of multifunctional character.

The implementation of social functions in rural areas is linked to meeting the needs of the local population, but it is also forced by people benefiting from the resources and assets of the areas. This refers to the access to social infrastructure services and having rewarding experiences from contact with the natural space and its development, and with the social environment.

The case is similar with the environmental function, but its performance is more affected by the surroundings of the rural areas than the very rural residents. The requirements of the general public and pressure of the public opinion continue to force the rural residents to act in a manner that is not harmful to the natural environment. Widespread use of water-supply networks and sewer systems, improvement of waste management and more strict requirements concerning the use of chemicals foster preservation of the quality of the natural environment or its improvement. Similar, but unintended role is fulfilled by the growth in afforestation of rural areas as a result of taking over, by the state forests, some part of former state-owned farmlands, setting aside some of these lands and their self-afforestation.

Conclusions

The widespread changes are probably the main sign of the contemporary world. These changes refer to different aspects of reality, also to the functions of rural areas. This is expressed in a change in the importance of individual functions and proportions between them, but also in the fact that some solutions related to them became outdated and, simultaneously, new aspects of rural areas functioning appear. A change in priorities in the socio-economic life results also in changes in expectations concerning the functions fulfilled by rural areas. Especially pronounced changes taking place in the areas in Poland stem, for instance, from the membership in the European Union and implementation of the Common Agricultural Policy. These changes are manifested, e.g., in:

- restricting the role of agriculture – decreasing share of agriculture in GDP generation and in employment, reduction in the UAA and number of farms;
- growing importance of non-agricultural economic activity – increased afforestation and functions linked to forestry, development of agritourism, development of folk manufacture and use of local raw materials;
- raising significance of the environmental function – enhanced environmental awareness, concern for biodiversity, landscape architecture, improvement in the status of the natural environment (soil, water, air);
- growing importance of the social and cultural functions – development of rural settlement, development of technical and social infrastructure, heightened activity of local communities.

Generalised assessment of the changes in the functions of rural areas blurs the differences in the trends referring to the specific spatial and functional dissimilarities. For example, decreasing role of agriculture as a manufacturer of food products and raw materials is accompanied by growing production of bioenergy raw materials; tourism development in rural areas is closely followed by growing risks for the natural environment and the concern for biodiversity poses a threat to the agricultural producers (e.g. beavers, wild boars) or fishermen (cormorants). Conflicts between functions and under individual functions of rural areas should be eliminated or reduced by efficient international, national and regional socio-economic policy ensuring both sustainable and multifunctional development of these areas considering general and local conditions. It is most important, for the quantitative and qualitative changes in rural areas, to meet the criteria of long-term benefits.

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