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## Changing structure of rural areas: the socio-economic characteristics of non-farming population in Poland

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**Abstract:** *Non-farming population represents an increasingly significant group of rural residents and therefore became an important object of study. The paper is primarily focused on the description of the non-farming rural population. The main source of the analysed data were surveys of families residing in 76 villages across Poland. The sampling of villages for the surveys was purposeful and representative, based on socio-economic features of the population and the land structure. Research shows that as many as 60% of rural families own no agricultural land in 2011 and on the basis of the analysis of socio-economic development observed in rural areas, it may be assumed that the non-farming rural population will grow further and that this socio-occupational category will increasingly determine the socio-economic development of rural areas.*

**Keywords:** *non-farming population, rural areas, regional differentiation*

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Changes in the socio-economic structure of rural population make the one of the most important determinants of the rural development. Non-farming population represents an increasingly significant group of rural residents and therefore became an important object of study. Compared to the rest of the rural population the non-farming population can be distinguished by the quality of human capital. It is primarily related to the considerable share of relatively young and skilled persons. Their lifestyle, the adopted system of values and social aspirations were increasingly similar to behaviour patterns observed in highly urbanised and industrialised areas. In the then prevailing conditions that group is the engine of civilisational progress in rural communities and represented occupational advancement (Turski 1970, Sikorska 2005, Sikorska 2013).

Regardless of the changed conditions for the development of the non-farming rural population, an upward trend was still observed over the years covered by subsequent IAFE-NRI surveys. It stemmed from determined efforts of the rural population to improve living conditions; since the development potential of a major share of farms was marginal and the feeling of redundancy was increasingly widespread among farmers, it was necessary to find new sources of income. Competitive pressure in agri-food markets and technological progress pushed down agricultural employment, therefore strong outflow of workforce from agriculture continued, in spite of family ties and the growing role of farms as protection against the loss of off-farm jobs. After Poland's accession to the European Union, those processes became even more intensive (Chmieliński, Otłowska 2007). As a result, despite a number of constraints on further growth of non-farming rural families, this category of households has become a permanent element of rural areas, and the future socio-economic rural development in fact largely relies on the non-farming population to be the engine of favourable changes in rural areas and agriculture.

### **Object of the study and research method**

The paper is primarily focused on the description of the non-farming rural population. Data on the mobility of the group in question, its demographic characteristics allow to identify changes which could be observed prior to accession and in the early period of Poland's membership in the European Union.

The main source of the analysed data were surveys of families residing in 76 villages across Poland, conducted by the Institute of Agricultural and Food Economics – National Research Institute (IAFE-NRI) in 2005 and 2011. The sampling of villages for the surveys was purposeful and representative, based on socio-economic features of the population and the land structure of agricultural

holdings located in the distinguished regions<sup>1</sup>. Basically, the sample excludes villages of a mixed nature (urban and rural), villages dominated by workers' families or those particularly attractive for tourists in terms of location. The surveyed villages represent a fixed sample for panel field surveys conducted periodically at the Social and Regional Policy Department of the IAFE-NRI. In 2005, the survey conducted in the same villages covered 8,604 rural families. In 2011, the number of surveyed rural households was 8,477 and they represented the total population of the villages in question. This group included 5,146 families without agricultural land, also referred to as non-farming families. It produced source materials on social characteristics and economic activities of all the residents.

It should be emphasised that the source materials for the analysis have the merit of providing comprehensive information. In the questionnaire for non-farming families most questions refer to the family, the outflow and inflow of families and individuals from and to the village. Detailed questions concern sources of income for the family and demographic characteristics, the educational level and working life of the family members. Another section of the questionnaire refers to the possession of basic goods, with a view to determining the living standards in the surveyed group of families.

## Structure and mobility

According to the applicable typology of rural areas, in Poland such regions represent 93.2% of Poland's total area. Those areas are inhabited by 14.7 million persons, i.e. 38.6% of Poland's population, but the farming population (with farms of more than 1 ha of agricultural land) represents only half of the rural population. It should be noted, however, that the share of the rural population has been slightly increasing. Particularly strong population growth has been in rural areas in the proximity of major cities or in those characterised by attractive rural and natural landscape. At the same time, fluctuations in the number of rural residents is increasingly accompanied by a marked downward trend of the farming population, following the fall in the number of family farms. As their number decreases, the role of agricultural holdings in providing the source of income is gradually diminishing.

Since 2000, the migration balance between the countryside and the city has been positive for rural areas, whereas previously an outflow of population from rural to urban areas was recorded. This trend is conducive to a significant

<sup>1</sup> Poland was divided into five Macroregions according to the administrative division into voivodships and similarities between historically developed characteristics of the socio-economic structure of particular rural areas and agriculture. Specific Macroregions include the following voivodships: Central-Western – the Kujawsko-Pomorskie and Wielkopolskie voivodships; Central-Eastern – the Łódzkie, Mazowieckie, Lubelskie and Podlaskie voivodships; South-Eastern – the Świętokrzyskie, Małopolskie, Podkarpackie and Śląskie voivodships; South-Western – the Opolskie, Lubuskie and Dolnośląskie voivodships; Northern – the Zachodniopomorskie, Pomorskie and Warmińsko-Mazurskie voivodships. For more on the division into Macroregions see: (Sikorska 2013).

improvement of technical and social infrastructure in the countryside, which reduces the gap in living conditions between rural and urban areas, whereas the development of communication allows relatively quick transfer to the workplace. As a result, in 2002-2011 the number of people living in rural areas increased by 3% (CSO, 2012). The reasons for this situation are believed to be, among others, the dynamic population of suburban towns which, in effect, become an extension of suburbs outside the administrative borders of large urban agglomerations. This situation has a positive impact on the economic development of these areas by increasing demand and increasing investment opportunities for local authorities through additional income to municipalities' budgets due to local taxes. Villages located away from major urban areas (big cities) and above all badly connected with them, face problems typical to peripheral regions. It should be noted that the peripherality of villages occurs not only along the borders of our country (e.g. the problems of the eastern borderland), but it also affects the boundaries of voivodeships (NUTS2 level). This is related to the weakness of the local labour markets and a still high level of backwardness in the development of economic infrastructure.

The analysis of the non-farming population has primarily demonstrated that this group represents a growing and ever more significant share of the rural population. As many as 60% of rural families owned no agricultural land in 2011. Therefore, the rural community can no longer be identified exclusively with agricultural activities.

**Table 1. Share of non-farming families in the rural population in Poland**

Year	Share of	
	Farming families	Non-farming families
1988	58,5	41,5
1992	54,6	45,4
1996	48,7	51,3
2000	46,0	54,0
2005	43,1	56,9
2011	39,3	60,7

Source: IAFE-NRI surveys.

The regional distribution of non-farming rural residents suggests that the division into the west and north of Poland, where the rural population was characterised by a high share of non-farming families, and central and eastern regions, with a relatively minor proportion of non-farming households, remained virtually unchanged. In some areas, particularly in the north and southwest, the group in question accounted for three-fourths of all rural fami-

lies. Even in the southern regions, where agricultural holdings are characterised by very traditional family ties, non-farming families represented nearly half of the rural community, irrespective of the economic status of individuals.

For the description of changes observed in rural areas, the increasing share of the non-farming population is significant in a number of ways. First of all, it indicates the diminishing role of agriculture as a determinant of the economic situation of the rural population. For more than a decade, the process has been intensified. In the past, the main mechanism for reducing the economic dependence of rural residents on agricultural holdings was the outflow of rural youth from agriculture to non-agricultural occupations. It was primarily driven by prospects of rapid social advancement and frequently involved plans to leave rural areas (Rosner 1991). The outflow of labour from agriculture observed in the past twenty years should be primarily attributed to necessary adjustments to new macroeconomic conditions, particularly the need to cope with greater competitive pressure and to reduce production costs. Significant land fragmentation, characteristic of Polish agricultural holdings, rapidly increased hidden unemployment in agriculture and, regardless of the imbalance in the labour market, the situation in agriculture pushed farmers to seek alternative incomes. As a result, even though non-farming rural families suffered all the adverse effects of Poland's economic transition, the number of such households continued to rise. Furthermore, partly due to increased interest on the part of rural youth in taking over the farms as rightful successors, the non-farming rural population included a growing number of retired farmers.

After Poland's accession to the European Union, the generally improving economic conditions and significant land fragmentation contributed to greater interest in non-agricultural activities, thus more new rural households became non-farming families. Ever greater job opportunities encouraged such attitudes (Polska wieś.. 2005).

The relatively biggest increase in the number of landless families was seen in the central-eastern macro-region. In this area, as many as 71% of the surveyed villages have seen an increase in landless families, whereas on a national scale it amounted to 55%. However, despite the fact that in the years 2005-2011 the average number of landless families in the villages of the central-eastern macro-region has increased by as much as 15% (in the whole data set it was approx. 6%), it still was the lowest number in comparison to all of the separate macro-regions. In 2011, the average village in this macro-region has a population of just 45 landless families, whereas in relation to all surveyed villages the average was 68.

The relatively highest stability as regards the relationship between the number of towns in which the population of landless families decreased or increased could be found in villages located in the south-western and central-western macro-region. In the years 2005-2011, the average number of landless families

living in villages located in the south-western macro-region increased by 3%, while in the central-western macro-region no changes have been recorded.

## Socio-demographic structure

The non-farming rural population was characterised by a high share of younger working age persons, as well as by a relatively high proportion of children and young people. The pre-working age population accounted for ca. one-fourth, a higher share than that of the post-working age population (less than one-fifth of the surveyed group). However, in recent years there has been an intensification of the demographic ageing of the non-farming rural population. In 2005-2011, as compared to 2000-2005, there was an increase in both the post-working age population and the non-mobility working age population.

For years, the demographic structure of the non-farming population in rural areas has been determined by the inflow of persons who discontinued farming and took up paid employment. In recent years, the age structure of the group in question has largely been affected by changes resulting from job migration of families/individuals and more widespread education, particularly higher education. Another important factor has been a growing number of retired farmers in the non-farming population. Combined with job migration by young members of non-farming families, this pattern determines the demographic ageing of the population in question.

With regard to the whole non-farming population surveyed, the working age population accounted for more than half, the majority being the mobility age population, i.e. persons at the stage in life distinguished by greater social activity. It could be reflected in geographical or job mobility, choosing a different type of employment or in the family situation. Presumably, such demographic features of the surveyed group indicated its significant potential and the capacity to influence overall changes in rural communities.

**Table 2. Non-farming rural population by age**

Specification	Share of*									
	the pre-working age population		the working age population		of which: z czego				the post-working age population	
	2005	2011	2005	2011	the age of mobility		the age of non-mobility		2005	2011
Year	2005	2011	2005	2011	2005	2011	2005	2011	2005	2011
non-farming families	22.2	19.2	58.8	61.3	38.1	37.6	20.7	23.7	19.0	19.5

Source: IAFE-NRI surveys.

Importantly, the rural community is also characterised by significant differences in the educational level between the farming and non-farming population. Relevant data primarily illustrate social and economic aspirations of young people. The improvement in the educational level was found to be

stronger in the farming population (in terms of secondary, post-secondary and higher education) than among persons without agricultural land. At the same time, the gap between the farming and non-farming rural population had been gradually narrowing, which is primarily reflected in the growth rate of persons with secondary education (Table 3). It follows that education opportunities and aspirations have been increasingly similar in rural areas, and regardless of the type of economic activity education is perceived as a main precondition of social and economic advancement as well as of improved living standards of the rural population.

**Table 3. Rural population aged 15 or over by socio-economic category and education**

Specification Y	Year	Share of population with			
		primary education	basic vocational education	secondary and post-secondary education	higher education
non-farming families	2005	36.1	36.1	22.5	5.3
	<b>2011</b>	<b>26.8</b>	<b>33.1</b>	<b>29.1</b>	<b>11.1</b>
farming families	2005	34.4	37.4	23.2	5.0
	<b>2011</b>	<b>26.4</b>	<b>30.1</b>	<b>31.5</b>	<b>12.0</b>

Source: IAFE-NRI surveys.

The importance of the educational level as a determinant of individual position in the labour market is very clear in data on rural unemployment as the unemployment rate differs between social groups. According to the surveys, the situation of the population in the labour market largely depends on the following factors: age, education, trade/profession and the place of residence.

## Conclusions

The analysis of the non-farming rural population has primarily demonstrated that persons without agricultural land represent an increasingly significant group of rural residents. From 1988 the number of non-farming rural families rose by 15.4 percentage points, up to as many as 60% of all the rural households in 2011 (Chmieliński, forthcoming). The main determinant of such changes was the abandonment of farming and taking up non-agricultural activities by the rural population or the discontinuation of production at the retirement age. Therefore, the rural population can no longer be identified with the farming population. In some regions of Poland, particularly in the north and southwest, the group in question accounts for three-fourths of the total number of families. Even in the eastern Poland, where agricultural holdings have been characterised by very traditional family ties, non-farming families represent nearly half of the rural community, irrespective of the economic status of individuals.



The processes of changes in the rural community described above are subject to a number of different, and even opposing factors. These factors can be broadly divided into exogenous and endogenous. The main development potential has its source in endogenous factors, especially in the human and social capital, natural and cultural beauty, natural conditions to specific forms of management (such as agriculture or tourism), as well as in the level of technical and social infrastructure development. Improvement of the situation in the countryside, and above all in relation to the vitality of rural areas and the reconstruction of agricultural structures must be associated with an increase in sophistication of diversification processes of economic activity in these populations – in the so-called multifunctional rural development. The processes of concentration in agriculture, particularly in relation to land, the phenomenon of migration and the increasing importance of location (access to non-agricultural labour markets) will determine the scale of the changes in the rural settlement networks and communities living in rural areas.

Due to the local conditions of occurring transformations in rural areas and agriculture, policy measures influencing the pace of these processes should also be varied. Their construction should be directed by a new philosophy of development, relying on the understanding that, for a village, the development of other economic activities is as important as agriculture, and perhaps even more important, especially the creation of new jobs in non-agricultural fields, as well as the creation of conditions conducive to the implementation of these tasks, the activation of local communities.

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