

## The development of rural areas in Poland under transformation conditions

### Rozwój obszarów wiejskich w Polsce w warunkach transformacji

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**Abstract.** In terms of the socioeconomic development, rural areas differ from urban ones and, due to their specificity, are a place where substantial developmental problems tend to accumulate. The central aim of the present paper is to describe the situation of rural areas in Poland under the conditions of the transforming Polish economy. The first part of the paper presents the most important phenomena occurring there as a result of the systemic transformations and Poland's accession to the European Union. The second part focuses on the conditions created by the location, demography, economics, infrastructure, and social factors, which substantially impact the development potential of the Polish rural areas. Then, the strengths and weaknesses of these areas are identified. A drive towards increasing the attractiveness of the Polish countryside as a place of residence and work should be a priority. The development of the rural areas, in particular those facing problems, ought to be supported by the effective state interventionism whose instruments should be based on practical experience, and tailored to the specific local conditions.

**Key words:** rural areas, agriculture • economic transformation • determinants of development

**Streszczenie.** Obszary wiejskie w Polsce istotnie odbiegają poziomem rozwoju społeczno-gospodarczego od terenów miejskich i są miejscem akumulacji wielu poważnych problemów rozwojowych, które w dużej mierze wynikają ze specyfiki wsi. Podstawowym celem opracowania jest zaprezentowanie sytuacji obszarów wiejskich w Polsce w warunkach transformacji gospodarki naszego kraju. W pierwszej części pracy przedstawiono najważniejsze zjawiska zachodzące na tych obszarach w efekcie transformacji systemowej oraz wstąpienia Polski do Unii Europejskiej. W dalszej części omówiono wybrane czynniki, które istotnie wpływają na możliwości rozwoju polskich obszarów wiejskich, koncentrując się na uwarunkowaniach lokalizacyjnych, demograficznych, ekonomicznych, infrastrukturalnych.

turalnych i społecznych. Ponadto wyszczególniono mocne i słabe strony tych obszarów. Wskazano, że priorytetem powinno być dążenie do podniesienia atrakcyjności obszarów wiejskich jako miejsca pracy i zamieszkania. Rozwój obszarów wiejskich, szczególnie tych problemowych, powinien być wspierany skutecznym interwencjonizmem państwowym, którego instrumenty powinny bazować na doświadczeniach praktycznych, dopasowanych do konkretnych uwarunkowań lokalnych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** obszary wiejskie • rolnictwo • transformacja gospodarcza • uwarunkowania rozwoju

## Introduction

In highly developed countries, agriculture generally does not constitute a leading sector of the economy. Nevertheless, it remains important where rural areas cover a major part of the total surface area of the country, thus being a vital factor in its social and economic policy. The specific characteristics the rural areas possess in many countries, Poland included, are a source of multiple problems that are difficult to solve, which may contribute to impeding the country's development on both local and national level. The last twenty years have been a period of special significance for Poland due to the change of its political and economic system and the country's accession to the structures of the European Union. The last decade of the 20th century and the first years of the present one have, therefore, brought about substantial economic, social and cultural changes also in the Polish countryside.

The main objective of the study is to outline the situation of rural areas in Poland, showing it against a background of the transforming Polish economy. First, the paper describes the most important phenomena occurring in these areas as a consequence of the systemic transformation and Poland's accession to the EU. Then, the work presents the conditions that have a substantial impact on the possibilities of the development of the Polish countryside, with special focus on location, demography, and economic, infrastructural and social conditions. In addition, the strengths and weaknesses of the Polish rural areas are identified.

## Material and methods

The source materials for economic statistical analysis came from the Central Statistical Office and the Ministry of Regional Development. The materials describing qualitative issues originated mainly from the available literature on the subject. The research covered the area of Poland in the period following the country's accession to the European Union (for some issues, a longer period).

The analysis was performed using a descriptive method and an induction-deduction method. The results were presented by means of graphics, tables, and descriptive techniques.

## Results

### Directions of changes occurring in the rural areas of Poland

During the period of transformation from a centrally planned economy into a market economy, Poland has been developing fastest among all the Central and Eastern European economies undergoing the transformations. Nonetheless, this was limited to a relatively small number of centres located within or nearby large urban agglomerations and some medium-size cities and towns. The economic development of the 1990's did not extend to the area of the entire country; many regions suffered stagnation and decline. This was especially the case of rural areas where agriculture has always been one of the most important sectors of the local economy<sup>1</sup>. The fact that the transformation of the Polish economy had a particular impact on the development of these areas was due to a combination of various factors rooted both in agriculture itself and in other sectors of the national economy.

Besides the change of the economic system, it was also Poland's accession to the European Union that influenced the social and economic situation of the rural population. With the implementation of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), Polish farmers were faced with new challenges such as the need to operate in the conditions of increased competition, implement new methods and technologies of production, and maintain sustainable development. At the same time, they were provided support in the form of direct farming subsidies and offered an opportunity to use programmes launched in the frames of the CAP. The current developmental processes taking place in the countryside consist, first and foremost, in increasing the living standard of rural families by modernising agriculture and changing agrarian structure, creating jobs in rural areas but outside of the agricultural sector, and stopping the outflow of the population. This is done, among others, through industrialising the countryside, supporting rural entrepreneurship, stimulating local initiatives, and creating individual change patterns by rural communities.

Since rural areas account for a substantial part of the economy, their development should be viewed in a broader economic context. On the one hand, it impacts the development of the entire economy; on the other hand, it also depends on the latter.

The social and economic development of the rural areas, understood as the rate and direction of changes in local communities leading to the improved conditions and quality of life, is a derivative of a host of multiple factors among which those of a local nature play a significant part. The local factors are responsible for the variation in development level between the units (districts<sup>2</sup>) that are similar in many respects, and frequently even among the neighbouring ones.

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<sup>1</sup> See: J. Rowiński, Uwarunkowania i szanse rozwoju regionów wiejskich – wymiar krajowy i regionalny. Ekspertyza wykonana na zlecenie Departamentu Koordynacji Polityki Strukturalnej MGPiPS [Development determinants and opportunities of rural regions – national and regional dimension. Expert opinion commissioned by the Department for Coordination of Structural Policy of the Ministry of Economy, Labour, and Social Policy] (<http://www.funduszestrukturne.gov.pl/informator/npr2/ekspertyzy/uwarunkowania%20i%20szanse%20rowinski.pdf>, pp. 1–3; accessed 24.06.2013).

<sup>2</sup> District – the smallest administrative unit in Poland.

The presence of a factor conducive to development in a given rural area does not mean that the process of development will occur automatically. Achieving the desired developmental effects requires adopting a complex approach to the mechanisms setting such factors into action, as well as considering their synergy (Korenik 1999, p. 37).

## Some factors influencing the development of rural areas in Poland

The development of rural areas is determined by multiple factors. The latter may be classified into the following groups:

- factors related to the geographical location (of environmental and non-environmental nature),
- demographic factors,
- factors related to the spatial development (characterised by the level of development of the technical and social infrastructure).

The location of a district in the local, regional, national, and international space is a specific development factor, called a location rent. It can be defined as potential, more or less measurable, advantages that result from occupying a given place. An attractive location, therefore, is a huge bonus for a district. Attractiveness may be due to environmental and non-environmental factors. The latter include the location in the vicinity of urban centres and the availability of transport (the vicinity of transport nodes), and the related advantages. Being situated in the vicinity of regional, sub-regional or local (in the case of districts) centres is therefore conducive to the transformation of the structure of rural areas and the functions they fulfil, whereas a peripheral location is conducive to stagnation or even decline. It is worth mentioning that peripheral zones in Poland account for 50% of its area and are inhabited by 30% of the population. Taking into account the present state of the transport infrastructure, these districts stand a limited chance of catching up with the development of big urban centres and conurbations.

The natural, objective basis for the development of rural areas, closely connected with their geographic location, is formed by environmental conditions, being the key factor supporting the development of not merely the agriculture itself, but also of the possibilities of multi-functional rural development. They may foster, limit, or even render impossible the rational economic use of these areas. The spatial variation in environmental conditions significantly impacts the type and distribution of economic activity.

Topography, climate, and soil quality are factors of fundamental significance for the development of agricultural production. Having 91.3% of surface area located less than 300 m below sea level, Poland is a lowland country, although with substantially varied soil and climate conditions. According to the Institute of Soil Science and Plant Cultivation (IUNG), the valuation ratio of the agricultural production space, calculated with the quality and usefulness of soil for agricultural purposes, agri-climate, relief, and water conditions taken into account, averages 66.6 points for the country, and displays regional variation (Kukuła and Krasowicz 2007, p. 7). The environmental conditions of Poland, compared to those in other parts of Europe, are significantly less

favourable due to the considerable proportion of weak and acidic soils (the soil quality in Western Europe is 25% higher), low precipitation, and a short vegetation season. As a result, the production potential, limited by the climatic conditions, is 25–35% lower than, for example, in France, Great Britain, Ireland, Portugal, the western part of Germany, or even in Italy.

Nowadays, especially in view of the need for creating opportunities to develop non-agricultural business activities in rural areas, particular attention is drawn to such elements as mineral resources, water, air, and biotic resources (i.e. plants and animals), and to qualities which are difficult to measure (e.g. landscape). They are increasingly more appreciated in the economic policy. Clean air, healthy climate, and the recreational and aesthetic values of the landscape are factors that determine the developmental potential of many a region. Preservation of the traditional economy in rural areas allows one to preserve agricultural landscapes of high environmental value and rich biological diversity.

Poland belongs to the group of European countries with highest biodiversity indices; ca 30% of arable land in our country display high environmental qualities, acting as nature refuges for many wildlife species (MRR 2011, p. 140). The local resources of the countryside: mountains, lakes, seas, or forests, act as a strong magnet attracting tourists, which stimulates the local economy, boosts the demand for local goods and services, and thus helps to increase the income of the rural population (Zawalińska 2009, p. 25). Districts with a high touristic potential are concentrated mainly in the coastal belt, in the lakelands (in particular in Warmia and Masuria), as well as in the mountain ranges of Poland. Also districts located within the boundaries of national parks or protected landscape areas are attractive for tourism.

The development of rural areas is also influenced by demographic processes. This factor shows a wide spatial variation.

The size of the population, and its education, age and sex distribution are the quantitative and qualitative factors that influence the development of human capital, and determine the strengths and weaknesses of a given area. Hence, being connected to numerous areas of life and work of the rural populations such as education, labour market, health situation, residential situation, professional activity, unemployment, old age and disability pensions, social care, migration processes, etc. (Jończy 2008, p. 61), the size of the population, its social and demographic structure, as well as the forecasted tendencies significantly impact the development of rural areas. Some characteristics of the rural areas of Poland as compared with the urban areas are shown in Table 1.

Human resources constitute an important element of the developmental capital and potential of rural areas in Poland. The number of rural inhabitants, unlike the one of urban dwellers, is increasing systematically, with the rise being recorded mainly in the vicinity of metropolitan areas. The Polish countryside is less densely populated than the urban areas. The rural population density is higher in the southern part of the country, and lowest in the north-east. The rural inhabitants are younger than the urban ones, and more children are born in the countryside, too. Large cities experience migration from city centres to zones surrounding the cities, and the trend is permanent. At the same time, the rural inhabitants migrate to cities in search for

**Table 1.** Selected data characterising the social and demographic situation of the rural and urban areas of Poland in the year 2010

Specification	Rural areas	Urban areas
Population density (persons/km <sup>2</sup> )	51	1089
Birth rate	1.4	0.6
Net migration per 1000 inhabitants	3.1	-2.1
Median age (years)	men	37.0
	women	41.7
Old age dependency ratio*	58	53
Share of population in working age in total population (%)	63.1	65.3
Share of population with higher education in total population aged 13+ (%)	8.8	25.0

\* the number of people in non-working age per 100 persons in working age

Source: Authors' study based on the data from the Central Statistical Office (GUS 2013)

employment or to continue education. This leads to the depopulation of villages and the aging of their population, especially in the peripheral areas of the country, among them in Eastern Poland. Despite an increase in the educational aspirations of the rural inhabitants, the distance between the countryside and the city still persists. In 2010, the share of the population with higher education in the total population aged 13+ was almost three times lower than in the city (8.8% vs. 25.0%). The advantages of the Polish countryside include a positive net migration and a positive birth rate, as well as a decreasing old age dependency ratio and, in the last few years, a systematically increasing share of the population in working age (Table 2).

The competitiveness of a given area depends largely on the conditions it offers for doing business. The factors that play a role here include the economic functions performed by the area, and its infrastructure. Their nature is relatively stable and objective. The economic conditions, thus, constitute a substantial consideration when formulating development strategies for rural areas (Ślusarz 2005, p. 203).

**Table 2.** Share (%) of the population in pre-working, working, and post-working age in the total population of the rural and urban areas of Poland

Year	Pre-working age (%)		Working age (%)		Post-working age (%)	
	Urban areas	Rural areas	Urban areas	Rural areas	Urban areas	Rural areas
2004	19	24	66	60	15	15
2010	17	21	65	63	18	16

Source: MRR (2011, p. 146)

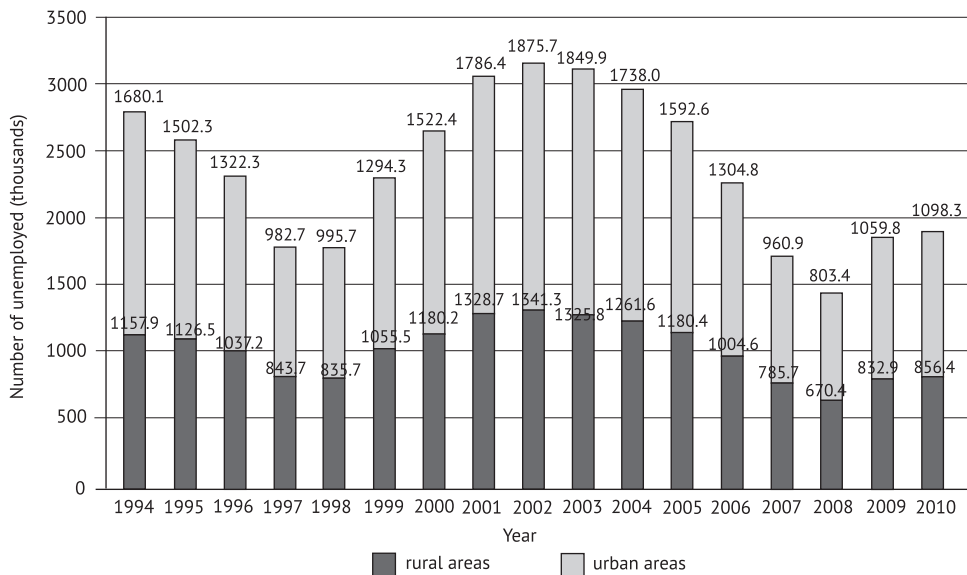
The state of the technical infrastructure (water, power, gas, sewage, road networks) undoubtedly determines to a high degree the development of business activity in the countryside, deciding about its scope, structure, and spatial distribution. Underdeveloped infrastructure counts among the most serious obstacles to the development of rural areas. The latter, in general, have a much poorer technical infrastructure than urban areas, although the situation in this respect is continuously improving. An appropriate transportation system is one of the key elements of infrastructure, contributing to the development potential of an area. An insufficient level of technical infrastructure is responsible not only for the low standard of living of the rural population, but also for the low attractiveness of the countryside to potential investors (Ślusarz 2005, s. 207). The development of the infrastructure in Polish rural areas has been hampered by the limited financial capacity of local governments. Since the year 2004, however, the situation has improved thanks to the subsidies from domestic and foreign public funds, including EU funds. Nonetheless, the distance between Poland and highly developed EU countries has remained considerable (MRiRW 2005, pp. 22–25).

Underinvestment in the social infrastructure and its maladjustment to the existing needs adversely affect the quality of life in rural areas and impede the creation of job opportunities outside of agriculture. An easy access to the social infrastructure makes it possible for the inhabitants to engage in economic and social activity, and contributes to counteracting unfavourable migration trends. This primarily applies to cultural institutions, tourist facilities, schools, and social and health-care facilities (Żmija K. 2011, p. 748). The social infrastructure of Polish rural areas is quite poorly developed, although wide regional variation is noted in this respect, with the north-eastern part of Poland being the worst equipped with the facilities in question.

The condition and structure of the local economy and, in particular, the structure of the economic functions fulfilled by a given area are of relevance to the developmental processes taking place in the Polish countryside. A varied functional structure of the rural economy (multi-functionality), especially where the agricultural function does not dominate over other functions, is favourable, while the domination of a specific type of economic activity in a given area constitutes a threat to its appropriate development. The basic condition for the development of rural areas is the increase in the level of their diversity, consisting in the enrichment of their social and economic functions as well as in the shaping and protection of their cultural and natural landscapes (Kłodziński 2010, p. 10). A significant part of the Polish rural areas have a purely agricultural nature, hence the crisis that affected the agricultural sector in the period of transformation impeded the development of many mono-functional agricultural parts of Poland, being the main cause of the impoverishment of the rural population. The membership of the European Union obviously creates opportunities for Polish agriculture, but mostly for agricultural holdings in a good economic condition. Admittedly, the EU aid programmes, the opening of new markets, and the increase in food prices have substantially improved the situation of many farmer families; nevertheless, they have not remedied or solved all the problems encountered by the Polish rural areas and agriculture.

Both presently and in the future, agriculture shall play an important role in rural areas without, however, generating new job opportunities. Hence, its share in the

economic development of the entire country and specifically of the countryside is expected to further decrease. Assessing the Polish agriculture in labour market terms, it is worth mentioning that such parameters as the number of employed in agriculture and their proportion in the total number of the employed place Poland among the EU countries that have not yet solved the problem with the excessive number of people working in agriculture. The disadvantageous situation on the labour market undoubtedly affects the developmental potential of these areas. The data on registered unemployment in the rural vs. urban areas of Poland in the years 1994–2010 are shown in Figure 1.



**Fig. 1.** Registered unemployment in the rural and urban areas of Poland in the years 1994–2010 (state as of the end of the reporting period)

Source: Authors' study based on the data from the Central Statistical Office (GUS)

In the mid-1990s, the number of unemployed living in the Polish countryside was 1157.9 thousand, which accounted for 40.8% of all the unemployed registered in Poland at that time. In subsequent years, the rural unemployment tended to decrease (down to 835.7 thousand in 1998), and then, at the end of the 1990s, it rose dramatically, to reach the level of 1341.3 thousand in 2002. The years 2003–2008 saw a decrease in the number of unemployed, however, its dynamics in rural areas was lower than in cities. In the following years, the number of rural inhabitants registered as unemployed kept growing, to achieve the level of 856.4 thousand (43.8% of all the unemployed registered in the country) at the end of 2010. The unemployment occurring in the Polish countryside is a derivative of the unemployment in the economy as a whole, as well as the low mobility of the residents of rural areas, and the limited capacity of the labour market in the countryside (Żmija D. 2013, p. 71).



A disadvantageous situation in agriculture and on the rural labour market translates directly into a poor standard of living of the rural population. One of the negative effects of poverty is that it minimises chances to obtain a proper education. This, in turn, can lead to the hereditary unemployment and social exclusion of this segment of the country's population (Žmija K. 2011, p. 748).

The low development level of agriculture stems from many a premise, one of those, as a rule, being a small size of agricultural holdings. As demonstrated by the results of the Agricultural Census 2010, the agrarian structure of Poland, especially in its south-eastern part, is still highly fragmented, which should be considered a serious disadvantage (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Selected data on agricultural holdings in Poland according to the Agricultural Census 2002 and Agricultural Census 2010

Specification	2002	2010	Dynamics*
Total number of holdings (thousands)	2 933	2 278	77.7
of which:			
Number of holdings engaged in agricultural activity (thousands)	2 172	1 891	87.1
Total arable land (thousand ha)	16 899	15 534	91.9
Average size of agricultural holding (ha AL)	5.76	6.82	118.4

\* (year 2010 : year 2002) · 100

Source: GUS (2003, 2011)

During the period 2002–2010, the total number of agricultural holdings in Poland has decreased by 22.3%. A smaller drop, by 12.9%, was recorded for agricultural holdings engaged in agricultural activity. Over these years, the total area of arable land has decreased, whereas the average size of an agricultural holding has only slightly increased (by 1.06 ha), to reach 6.82 ha in 2010. Therefore, the area structure of Polish farms has been changing too little and too slowly to cause substantial transformation to the Polish agriculture.

The factors discussed above impact the course of the developmental processes taking place in rural areas. Some of the factors are conducive to development, and some have an impeding effect. Stimulation of the local development with the use of the former should be based on local initiatives focused on the needs, aspirations, and values of local communities, but with taking into account the global form of the development processes.

## Conclusions

The 1990s transformation of the Polish economy caused a serious crisis in Polish agriculture and in the rural areas of Poland. This situation was mainly due to the collapse of the state-owned agricultural farms as well as to the rise in production costs, combined

with a relatively low increase in the prices of agricultural products, and the import of cheap foods from abroad. The structural changes consisting in the elimination of small farms and the strengthening of strongest ones in the free market conditions have not been entirely successful. The current situation in the Polish agriculture and rural areas indicates that the development of non-agricultural functions is one of the most important factors contributing to the modernisation of the Polish countryside. Since 2004, the development policy for the Polish rural areas has been closely tied with the European Union policy, and most of the funds allocated for these purposes have come from the EU budget. Poland's accession to the EU, leading to the inclusion of the Polish agriculture and rural areas in the financial support mechanisms of the European Union, provided districts with the access to the funds earmarked for the implementation of development strategies. This has created an opportunity to construct and enact development scenarios tailored to the specific conditions of a given district.

Rural areas exhibit a great diversity; therefore, individual districts have to deal with various combinations of developmental factors. Some districts suffer from the accumulation of disadvantageous conditions; in others, disadvantageous factors are compensated to a certain extent by factors conducive to development; while yet other districts enjoy the accumulation of factors favourably influencing their development. Undoubtedly, certain conditions for development constitute the strengths of rural areas. First and foremost, they include a good state of the natural environment in certain regions, conducive to the development of agricultural and non-agricultural activities connected with recreation and leisure; substantial and not fully utilised land resources; as well as cheap working force; and thus low unit costs of labour and land. Among the strengths are also advantageous trends in demography, and a high latent potential of local communities. The weaknesses of the rural areas of Poland lie in a peripheral location of many districts in relation to urban centres; a high percentage of areas with unfavourable farming conditions, which precludes achieving high economic gains from agricultural activities; a lower quality of human capital; an unfavourable situation in agriculture and on the labour market; as well as a lower mobility of rural residents. Other factors may include the lack of capital in agriculture and in rural areas; insufficient employment possibilities outside of agriculture; underdeveloped social and technical infrastructure; and limited financial capacity of local governments.

The complex nature of the problem, the changeable nature of developmental conditions, and the very specificity of the rural areas do not permit to draw a single, commonly accepted roadmap for their development. Undoubtedly, a drive towards increasing the attractiveness of rural areas as places of residence and work should be a priority. This goal may prove achievable thanks to the activation of local communities, supported by appropriate instruments, policies, and institutions of the state. The active role of inhabitants produces a synergistic effect, multiplying the effect of the investments. The development of rural areas, in particular those dealing with problems, ought to be supported by the effective state interventionism whose instruments should be based on practical experience, and tailored to the specific local developmental conditions.

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