

# Social factors influencing the differences between developed and less developed regions

## *Sociální faktory ovlivňující rozdíly mezi rozvinutými a méně rozvinutými regiony*

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**Abstract:** The aim of the rural development programs is the stabilisation of rural population and forming the perspectives for increasing the quality of life for all social groups in the communities as well as in the region. Less developed areas suffer for a long term from the cumulated negative factors of economic and social development. Their detailed identification which is theoretically considered in this paper can help to improve the particular measures towards the removal of the most urgent problems.

**Key words:** Czech countryside, quality of life, less favoured areas

**Abstrakt:** Cílem rozvojových programů zaměřených na venkov je stabilizace venkovské populace a utváření předpokladů pro zvyšování kvality života pro všechny sociální skupiny v obcích a regionech. Méně příznivé (znevýhodněné) venkovské oblasti jsou dlouhou dobu ovlivňovány kumulací negativních faktorů ekonomického a sociálního rozvoje. Jejich přesná identifikace, která je v teoretické rovině posuzována v tomto článku, může napomoci zlepšit určitá opatření směrem k odstranění nejurgentnějších problémů.

**Klíčová slova:** český venkov, kvalita života, méně příznivé oblasti

The Czech countryside is characterized by a strongly dispersed system of settlement. At present, there are 10 230 060 inhabitants in the Czech Republic. They are living in the 6 258 communities (municipalities). Rural areas cover about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the Czech territory; however, only 2 666 000 inhabitants (i.e. about  $\frac{1}{4}$  populations) live there. Rural communities are usually defined in the Czech context as localities with less than 2 000 inhabitants. In the Czech Republic such communities represent 5 634 municipalities (i.e. 90% of all communities). An average rural community has 473 inhabitants. The disperse system of rural settlements is due to the historical development. Rural areas are also typical by the lower density of population, worse infrastructure or absence of the needed infrastructure and worse possibilities of finding suitable jobs in comparison with the

urban areas. Rural life unwinds from the basic material conditions of employment, predominant housing in the farmhouses or family houses, ownership of garden, orchard and plot with the small animals.

Quality of life in the countryside is influenced above all by the more simple structures with transparent social relations, non-anonymity within villages, and number of relatives in the close neighbourhood, long-standing friendly and neighbourly relations. A higher social control and other types of social communication (with the predominance of personal contacts) belong to the rural life as a result of these conditions. Public life and political activities and attitudes of rural population are also different.

Any attempt to seek for one key element, which forms the quality of rural life in the village, means

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to carry out the work of deceptive nature. Always it is the result of effects of many influencing factors and their constellation in time and space. Even seemingly very different rural areas can have almost identical difficulties they face and vice versa. Very similar adjoining villages can develop in an entirely different ways. These similarities and differences are not only Czech rural areas specificity. Also European countryside distinguishes itself in the diversity, which was connected in the past with the categories of development of “rural” and “urban” space. At present, the growing “fuzziness” and changeover of both spaces is emphasized, which makes the definition of more clear methodological determination of quantitative (mainly economic) development indicators more difficult. It is the influence and meaning of social indicators that is more and more stressed (Labrianidis 2004).

#### **ECONOMIC ASPECTS OF LESS FAVOURED AREAS (LFA) CHARACTERISTICS**

Equalling more or less developed regions with more or less favoured areas is not quite correct. Nevertheless, we can find certain identical criteria of the determination. We can understand the less favoured areas partly from the narrow aspect as areas which are less suitable for agriculture<sup>1</sup> and partly from the broader aspect as areas which are less favoured for life. Just in the broader aspect there are combined the influence of geographical localisation, socio-demographic structure, historic development of territory as well as the condition of economic development and using of social potential of rural population. The term which is also often used – “periphery” – can gain importance of both geographical localisation and socio-economic position of area.

Let us look at the characteristics of less favoured areas from the point of view of agriculture at first, strictly speaking, from the point of view of the support system, which gradually developed in the past and had created the Common Agricultural Policy of EU.

Support of agriculture in a way of less favoured areas financial subsidies was established in the EU member’s states in 1975. The goal was to maintain the minimal size of rural settlement and the preservation of landscape (Council Directive 268/1975). The LFA list was put together in 1985 on the basis of delimitation of the EU member’s states (rules of Council

Directive 797/1985), which followed improving the efficiency of agricultural actors (subjects). In 1997 this list was elaborated (rules of the Council Directive 950/1997). Conditions of the LFA support payments were defined in details.<sup>2</sup> The rules of the European Commission Nr. 1257/1999 created the institutional frameworks for the use of agricultural and rural structural support in the EU programming period 2000–2006. The goal of the EU LFA support was to contribute to guarantee onward the agricultural land use, maintenance of rural landscape, preservation and strengthening of sustainable farming systems which respect the demands of environmental protection (Štolbová 2006).

Three main categories of LFA were (see Štolbová 2006):

- “Mountain areas” (areas where possibilities of land use are limited by the unfavoured climatic conditions, given by the altitude, with the result of significant shortening of growing season, prevalence of hillsides even in the lower altitude or combination of both factors). Areas to the North of 62<sup>nd</sup> parallel of latitude and some neighbouring areas were viewed in the same way as mountain areas;
- “Other less favoured areas” (areas where there is a threat that the use of land will be stopped/land abandonment/, however, the preservation of countryside is necessary). In these areas, there is the dominance of infertile, hardly cultivated soils; there is low productivity of natural environment as measured by basic indicators of their economic performance and outcomes, and small or diminishing density of population predominantly depending on farming;
- “Small areas” (afflicted with the specific disadvantages). They are called “small” ones because their land area must not reach over 4% of the acreage of the state.

Regulation of the European Commission Nr. 698/2005 concerning support from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) outlined two LFA main categories (instead of three): mountain and other than mountain areas (Štolbová 2006).

The effort to find categories which could define more precisely the disadvantages of rural areas continues. The idea is not to limit the categories only to the existence and development of farming possibilities in rural space. On the contrary, in the harmony with the European economic reality, which must face up and

<sup>1</sup> That is how these areas are considered in the documents of EU institutions which label them as “less favoured areas” (LFA).

<sup>2</sup> For detail see Štolbová (2006).

cope with the agricultural overproduction using the various measures, other than economic factors are included to the complex of evaluation aspects. One of the attempts to create the European rural area typology is using the criterion of “accessibility” of a certain area, with the categories of “lowest” accessibility (over 135 minutes), “middle” accessibility (between 82–135 minutes) and “high” accessibility (to 82 minutes) from defined point (Labrianidis 2004).<sup>3</sup>

This criterion can be combined with other constructed gauges of area value/quality. There are the other criteria the authors suggest to use:

- “*Dynamics/competitiveness*”, expressed by the average number of patents (in the sense of the confirmed grade labels, certificates, innovations, licences etc.), concerning material artefacts (products, goods etc.), but also ideas. They are combined with the accessibility criterion in the following way: “low accessibility” – *stagnant, progressive*; “middle accessibility” – *high, low*; “high accessibility” – *high, low*.
- “*Economic efficiency*”, expressed through the rate of GDP per capita. They are combined with the accessibility criterion in the following way: “low accessibility” – *relatively high, relatively low*; “middle accessibility” – *high, low*; “high accessibility” – *high, low*.
- “*The role of agriculture*”, expressed by the share of persons permanently employed in agriculture. They are combined with the accessibility criterion in the following way: “low accessibility” – *very important, relatively limited*; “middle accessibility” – *important, limited*; “high accessibility” – *important, limited*.

The method of category creation of the particular criteria as well as the above mentioned way of combination can be the matter of discussion. However, this approach has its advantages and can be based on the existing statistics. The methodology is also applicable for very different subjects (states, regions, localities).

On the other hand, the interpretation is very difficult and the results can be misleading. The deceptiveness is in the complexity and mutual interconnections of every socio-economic phenomenon and in the distinct meanings of the particular criteria (categories), referring to the particular territories and localities. Time accessibility (e.g. up to 82 minutes) has a different meaning, if someone travels by car on the highway, by comfortable train/bus in the cultural, densely populated area or by bicycle on a remote road in the

deserted landscape. Similarly we can find the extreme meaning differences in any other criterion.

## SOCIAL ASPECTS OF LFA CHARACTERISTICS

When comparing the economic LFA characteristics with the experience from the research done in the Czech countryside, it is obvious that various kinds of supports can significantly help to stabilize rural population and improve the quality of life. Typology of rural areas and creation of models and types of the countryside (by using of quantified criteria) make a good framework for the basic comparison of economic territorial potential and consequently for elaborating the tools supporting rural development.

However, when we try to work with the existing statistical data according to the similar logic and propose the criteria which could create the typology of social phenomena and processes in the same way in the territory, we encounter a number of limits and issues to be considered.

The Evaluation Report of the Institute of European Environmental Policy named “An evaluation of the less favoured area measure in the 25 member states of the European Union” (2006) emphasizes especially environmental impacts of the agricultural policy politics. The chapter “Impacts on the viability of rural communities” of mentioned report examines, in which way the supports in LFA contribute to the land use and how they maintain the viability of rural communities. The role of agriculture in the contemporary countryside is characterized as follows: Viability of rural communities is an outcome of many factors, including the density of population, age structure, access to health, education and recreational services, employment, opportunity of earnings, housing, transport infrastructure and suitable accessibility of locality. Surely, agriculture as the prevailing way of land use in the majority of the EU countries plays an important role in the maintenance of rural communities’ viability by the creation of jobs and by the contribution to the rural economy through the support of food chains as well as through other effects. Anyway, it is only one of many sectors in the increasingly subdividing economic system (An evaluation of the less favoured area measure in the 25 member states of the European Union 2006).

The question, which is as clear but has no explicit and simple answer is: do there exist any quantified

<sup>3</sup> Labrianidis’s ideas develop the work of Ballas and Kalogeressis (Ballas et al. 2003). To create the categories of accessibility they used 149 × 1 093 data tables of the NUTS 3 from regional database of the EUROSTAT (REGIO).

criteria, comparable to the used economic categories of territorial development? Or to reword the question: are there such criteria, which are possible to be simply compared with the economic categories without simplifying this relation in the interpretation?

The influence of social factors is undeniable. However, almost all factors are related to the others. One of the most important steps of analysis is the reduction of variables. Brief British manual "Sustainable development indicators in your pocket" (2006) itemizes the statistically monitored and thus easily accessible indicators of various life spheres, including contextual indicators. Therefore it suggests for example the variable society to be quantified and operationalized through the indicators of active local cooperation, criminality, fear from criminality, or variable employment and poverty to be quantified and operationalized through the indicators of employment, households of unemployed people, economically non-active persons, child poverty, young adults – without employment, education or skills, poverty of seniors, care for seniors)<sup>4</sup>. Such procedures suggest how the social variables are complex issues.

It is possible to display briefly and in tables any existing statistical data. Their interpretation gives the basic view about the development of the particular investigated spheres of rural life. The information presented in this way concerning the most important indicators, including social ones, is a good example of how the work with data can be done.

## CONCLUSIONS

Czech as well as international statistics provide a relatively broad data base. Using the statistics we can consider some aspects of rural regions social development. Statistical data allow a well founded description, eventually the interpretation that brings findings, which are at least partly verifiable.

More difficult task is the use of the existing statistics for the explanation of the phenomena and processes or their prediction in certain period of time. There are many examples, when the use of an unknown (i.e. undefined) variable fundamentally influenced the course of social process. The analysis of social situation could proceed from social structure of localities and regions description (demographic trends), towards their social potential (created by institutions, individuals and social groups), social capital (created by the functioning social networks)

and towards identification of conditions for stabilization of human resources.

The task of the responsible analyst is searching for missing information about social phenomena and processes (what the statistics solely cannot offer) and seeking the relations between economic and social factors. That is why the social sciences research is extremely difficult and unfortunately also financially demanding and time consuming. Any information which looks at first glance to be covering all aspects might finally be considered difficult to define all its aspects. For instance, density of population in the area opens a number of related questions: What is the socio-demographic structure of settlement? What sizes of localities prevail? What is the technical infrastructure of the territory (sewage system, waste water treatment plant, transport connection, accessibility of work places, basic services etc.)? What is the social infrastructure of area (accessibility of administrative institutions, social services, possibilities of development of social organisations, participation and cooperation of rural population etc.)? Do economic and social possibilities answer the density of settlement?

Similarly, there are other questions related to the information concerning, for instance, the rate of unemployment: What is the age, qualification and professional structure of the unemployed? How many graduates are there among them? What was the last job of the unemployed? What were the reasons of the employment loss? What are the possibilities of suitable jobs in the accessible environs? What is their interest to find a job? Are they willing to commute? For how long distances? Are they willing to take a less paid job?

Another example is the information about the share of population over 65 years (this share is usually typical for the characterization of rural municipalities). Here we can face these questions: Does the population over 65 years belong to the old residents or newcomers? What relations, friendly or neighbourly ties they have in the village and environs? What social services are accessible for them (from the aspect of distance and payments)? Do there exist the possibilities of their engagement in the economic, public and social life? Is this age group homogeneous or heterogeneous (from the aspect of qualification, interest about public life etc.)? Is there taken into account the use of their experience and engagement in the development programs in the villages?

The traditional perception of rural development was based on the simple model of linear development

<sup>4</sup> The other monitored indicators with their quantification and operationalization are Education, Health, Mobility and Accessibility, Social rightness, Public welfare etc.

of age structure, which prefers the settlement and stabilization of young families as the main guaranty of locality and region's development. It is assumed that the age structure is imitated by the education structure and both generate a higher involvement of population in entrepreneurial activities. However, the reality is different. Groups of population of all ages and education live in rural regions. They are assumed to co-operate to a certain degree, if their coexistence has to be sustainable (i.e. economically, socially and environmentally successful). Social variety will more likely grow and will also increase the demands for the social communication and organization. No matter how can these demands, which contribute to deepening the knowledge about social structure and its functioning seem to be sometimes non-proportional (looking from the point of view of time and financial costs), we should cope with the fact that the simple life direction generally fails in the every reality.

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