

The need of information and extension service for the countryside and its development (the opinions of local actors)

Potřeba informací a poradenství pro venkov a jeho rozvoj (názory místních aktérů)

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Abstract: The article starts with the theoretical definitions of various concepts (rural space, endogenous approach to the rural development, the actor operating in the particular locality for its development). Concerning the know-how of the rural/local actor, the information acquired also through extension service takes important position there. The methodological approach explains the use of sociological methods and techniques employed in research in two localities. This is continued by the analysis of the data gathered. The conclusions of the paper evaluate the knowledge from the group interviews and discuss the necessity of establishing an “institute” the task of which would be to provide and roof the extension service and the sufficient information level for the local, often rural actors. These actors then would use such information/extension service not only for a more efficient development of their localities, but also for a higher valorisation of their efforts in the “animation” of the rural localities.

Key words: extension service, information, local actor, group discussion, accessibility of rural areas

Abstrakt: Článek zprvu uvádí teoretické vymezení pojmového rámce (venkovský prostor, endogenní přístup pro rozvoj venkovského prostoru, aktér činný v konkrétní lokalitě pro rozvoj této lokality). Mezi „know-how“ rurálního/lokálního aktéra patří informace (informovanost), získávané mimo jiné také prostřednictvím poradenství. Metodický přístup osvětluje použití sociologických metod a technik použitých při terénním šetření ve dvou vybraných lokalitách. Následuje analýza získaných dat pomocí otevřeného kódování. Závěry tohoto článku vyhodnocují poznatky získané ze skupinových rozhovorů a polemizují o potřebnosti/nepotřebnosti zřízení „institutu“, jehož úkolem by bylo zajišťovat a zastřešovat poradenství a dostatečnou informovanost lokálních, často venkovských aktérů. Ti by se pak užíváním takovýchto poradenských/informačních služeb mohli nejen efektivněji podílet na rozvoji lokalit, v nichž působí, ale jejich využíváním také zhodnocovat své úsilí při „animování“ zmiňovaných míst.

Klíčová slova: poradenství, informace, lokální aktér, skupinová diskuse, dostupnost venkova

The local actors are, in the accordance with the principles of the endogenous approach, those who should have the best understanding of the problems of the location they operate in. Therefore, rural actor is essential for the development of the locality, where s/he acts. An information and knowledge, which is also

provided through advisory services and extensions, represents the crucial “know-how” of such rural/local actors. In this way, this paper addresses the issue of advisory services and extension. They are analyzed through the opinions of respondents. The main goal of this paper is therefore to answer the question

Supported by the Ministry of Regional Development CR (Grant No.11191/1491/4902 – Social capital as a factor influencing regional disparities and regional development) and IGA (Grant No. 200811190045, 11190/1312/113144 – The influence of local actors on the social and economic development of rural localities).

what is the role of extension in rural areas and what are the demands of the rural population (or better to say of its representatives in the studied localities) as for the quality and availability of the information local actors need for the successful development of their localities.

THEORETICAL APPROACHES

Rural space includes the countryside as a geographical space and also the countryside as a social space including agriculture as an activity connected with nature, which is typical for this space contrary to the urban space, which is rather typical by the activities connected with industry (Hudečková, Lošťák 2002). Defining rural space is, however, not a unanimous issue and the effort for its more precise/more clarifying/more objective definition does not leave in peace either geographers or sociologists or economists. There are various definitions of rural areas. They rank from the most broad and commonly used as those developed by the European Union (i.e. the indicators used by the OECD and the EUROSTAT), to a more "refined" delineation of rural areas in the Czech Republic which are offered for example by Perlín (2003) or Maříková (2007). A different view at the defining of space (not only rural) is offered by Hubík, who differentiates the space (using the social constructivism approach) into the so-called primary and secondary operational zones, which are at present given a new dimension by social networks (Hubík 2007).

Urban and rural were at the beginning viewed also by the sociological theories and terminology in the dichotomic way, in the way of the typologies of contrast (Tönnies, Durkheim, Weber, Sorokin, Zimmerman, and other). The dichotomic categories were used for defining of the societies of rural (non-urban) or

urban type¹. There prevailed the criterion of the demographical-statistical allocation of the population in the space (i.e. namely the indicators of the numbers and density of population in the given locality); even if the authors also used series of other indicators, so that each dwelling could be incorporated into the so-called continuum town-countryside².

Since the 1970s of the 20th century, rural space begins to be accentuated through the viewpoint of the healthy environment (once more both physical and social), which already fully respects the character and specificity of the rural space³. It considers the endeavour to sensitively perceive the nature with regard to the countryside itself as well as its recreational and healing function, further perceiving the socio-cultural context with respect to sustaining and the development of the rural sub-culture (personal ties, respect for traditions a non-stressful living temp and other), and lastly also perceiving the economic aspects developing agriculture in the optimal interconnection with the following services (Velký sociologický slovník, 1996). Most of the mentioned attributes of rural environment (both physical and social) are at present under the common denominator in the so-called multifunctional agriculture with the mission of sustainable life in the rural space. This understanding of rural space is the base of the contribution published in the *Agricultural Economics* (Šimková 2007; Hudečková, Ševčíková 2007a; 2007b, and other).

The countryside and its specific character (different from urban) are defined by its specificity, which is not characterised only by the quantitative inequalities and disparities⁴, but also by its peculiar qualities. This is also the reason of the complexity of the solution of the questions of the development of countryside/rural areas, which necessarily results in the interdisciplinary outlook. This issue is addressed in depths by the regional development theories with the roots

¹The ideas of Tönnies and Durkheim influenced the origin of the dichotomy concepts as the first of concepts of the rural-urban relations.

²A principle for another of the used concepts about rural-urban relations was put down in this way (the concept of the rural-urban continuum that develops more from the 1930s and dominates in the 1970s) that served well to empiric research but does not overcome the starting point of rural and urban opposites.

³At this time, there also begins to grow in the influence the last of the concepts addressing rural-urban relations, the most complex of the utilised concepts, the concept of convergence and divergence of rural and urban, which does not suffer from simplicity and at the same time does not favour either urban or rural. The rural is there put side by side with the urban as an equal partner, and both partners have the right of their own existence. However, neither does it refuse the fact that the urban dominates over the rural, and at the same time it accepts the values of the rural social space.

⁴The precise identification of the long-term and cumulative economic and social factors influencing the Czech less-favoured areas is given, on the theoretical level, by Majerová with accepting the fact that this identification can help "to improve certain measures in the direction of removing the most urgent problems" (Majerová 2007). A valuable identification of the diverging indicators among the urban and rural areas, in this case Slovak ones, is offered by the article of Buchta and Štulrajter (2007).

in economic theories (Ziegler, Peters, Schroers and Hahne in Jehle 1998). Later on (since the 1970s of the 20th century) also sociological theories (Alličs, Billaud, Mathieu – Mengin, Kayser in Hudečková, Jehle 1997) reflected the issue of rural peculiar qualities in its variety. Each of the mentioned theories in their long historical development emphasized a completely different viewpoint regarding the opinions on what is “the best” for the development of countryside and localities. Nevertheless, the various theories suggest the complexity and variety of the problems of the rural areas. The history of these theories also documents the question of the countryside (rural areas as lagging behind and at the same time retaining their identity) is not new. It was being addressed for more than one hundred years (Nelson in Lošťák, Hudečková 2008)⁵.

During time, two main approaches for dealing with the questions of the development of regions, countryside (rural space) or less favoured areas have crystallised: they are the exogenous and endogenous models of development. The basic principle of the exogenous models is seen in the possible development starting from outside the locality, while the endogenous models are looking for the development potentials namely inside the localities, as they dispose of the specific (natural, cultural, human) resources, which have to be mobilised for development⁶. Exogenous approaches were commonly applied up to the 1970s. In the 1980s, they proved to be insufficient and were criticised (Lowe 2000). The present level of knowledge shows that the most suitable is the combination and interconnecting of both approaches with the stress on the endogenous principles. In the most proper way, this approach is expressed by the perspective of the IERD⁷ – integrated endogenous regional (rural/local) development (economic, social, political, cultural, ecological etc.).

As stated above, the development of rural areas is a complex and complicated issue. Therefore, it necessitates the interdisciplinary approach. Moreover, because the local development cannot work without external interventions on one side, but it also cannot originate and function without the local will and initiative (in the sense of the endogenous development model) on the other side, it is also necessary to aim the theoretical section at the actors. The actors play (according to the endogenous approach to the rural development) the crucial role. The term actor originates from French (*acteur*), which has taken it from the Latin word actor. It means acting, i.e. the bearer, initiator or implementer of the social activities. The actor can be, in a more narrow sense of the word, the individual, in the wider sense the social group as a bearer of social activities. Thus actors can be perceived (in accordance with the requirements of the IERD concept) as “animators” (e.g. according to Kayser) or “social entrepreneurs” (according e.g. to Garfoli). They use their knowledge, education and experience to set up the relationships among the individual representatives of the exogenous and endogenous interventions, so that the synergic effect of the development-oriented activities can be achieved (Kayser, Garfoli in Hudečková, Jehle 1997). The actors and their “actorship” are seen by the French sociologist Crozier as follows: “*An actor has only rarely a goal and still less often a coherent project. Actors are numerous, more or less visible, more or less contradictory. However, they are connected by their behaviour... It is always a meaningful behaviour ...*” (Crozier in Hudečková, Jehle 1997).

An actor uses (in the ideal case) extension services for the realisation of his/her “animation” activities. Extension means, in the most common sense, the professional provision of expert advices, the proposals formulated by one subject/actor for solving the

⁵In the time of its origin (beginning of the 20th century), rural sociology in the USA was solving the practical question: “How to reach the social consensus in the originating American rural communities”, while the European sociology was mainly interested in the question “How to prevent lagging behind of the countryside at the simultaneous sustaining of its social identity”. The same question is practically being solved also at present (Hudečková, Lošťák 2002; Majerová, Majer 2003).

⁶The endogenous approach as an innovative utilisation of local resources is documented by Lošťák and Kučerová in the case study “The White Carpathians Traditions”. In this case, it regards the interconnecting of organic farmers and the environment protection activists (Lošťák, Kučerová 2007).

⁷The IERD strategies are not entirely new, they begun to be discussed in the 70s, when the regional policy was looking for strategies for the third world countries. After that, also the EU started thinking of the IERD strategies for its rural areas. Most obviously they were reflected in the initiative LEADER and that in its three subsequent versions – LEADER I, LEADER II and LEADER+. The base and impacts of the LEADER approach (the role and place of agriculture and the interconnected activities in the LEADER approach in the Czech Republic) is tackled by M. Lošťák a H. Hudečková in their lately published article in the Agricultural Economics (Lošťák, Hudečková 2008). The initiative LEADER+ and LEADER ČR were/are the platform for the origin and activity of the local active groups (further LAG) in the South Bohemia and Most regions (Pavlíková, Maříková 2007).

problem of another subject/actor. Both subjects, the poles of this specific communication, can be either individuals or institutions and organisations. From the sociological viewpoint, extension service can be considered from various angles. It can be perceived as the social interaction and the exchange of information with a relatively stable role of both sides interested – the advisor and the client (in this case, we can say the actors supplying the advice and the actors asking for it). However, the extension is also a set of specific activities with a precisely defined aims and rules. Extension service represents a form of help and influencing of the opinions as well as behaviour of the given clients, and at the same time it is also one of the social institutions resulting from the practical needs in the society (Velký sociologický slovník 1996). Extension service is often understood as an exchange of information. Information is any communication, news or data which is quantifiable. Sociology understands information, on the general level, as data or a statement on a certain reality (notwithstanding its knowledge contribution), in a more narrow sense it means a communication over the frame of the hitherto knowledge. Extension then is,

compared to the “mere” information, a certain “value added” when the demand side/subject gets together with the information also a certain evaluation whether and how to utilise the information. Often extension is mixed with or interconnected also with education (see further).

Extension services were and they still are a part of the European (e.g. the Lisbon Strategy⁸) as well as Czech strategic documents (e.g. the Rural Development Program⁹). They were also a part of some programs already implemented in the past (e.g. the Program of the Rural Areas Development – Extension Centres for Countryside¹⁰). Neither can extension services exist without financial support. The suppliers of extension services can be financed from various sources, which can be divided into three groups (Ježdíková, Pavlíková 2005):

- (1) those established and financed by the state, state institutions and bodies, supplying extension service as a free service for citizens,
- (2) private actors supplying paid extension services,
- (3) organisations, communities and associations supplying usually free extension services (established

⁸Its implementation became an important milestone for the extension services. The Lisbon Strategy starts from the vision of the competitive and dynamic European society based on knowledge and able of the stable dynamic growth (Freibergová 2007). Education and life-long learning are implemented into its goal “EU – Competitive and Dynamic Economy”.

⁹In this document, part of the Axis I (Improvement of the Competition of Agriculture and Forestry) is also the Measure I.3.4 Utilisation of Extension Services. Aiming of the axis is in harmony with the area in which the extension services are supplied. The portal www.agroporadenstvi.cz, managed by the present Institute of Agricultural Economics and Information (ÚZEI) in Prague centres its attention on agriculture and forestry (on the regional level of the individual regions of the Czech Republic on the NUTS 3 level managed by the Regional Information Centres). A similar portal which would supply extension services exclusively for the countryside does not exist yet. This gap is partially filled up by the portal www.infovenkov.cz (manager also by the ÚZEI), which is, however, oriented mainly at rural development, or as its main page proclaims “*the aim is to made available the complete information regarding the rural areas development to all subjects in the countryside and to make the communication and passing information among all interested subjects in the Czech Republic as well as abroad, more efficient*” (ibid). The information on countryside and for countryside necessary to complement the above mentioned are supplied by the portals www.leaderplus.cz, www.leadercz and www.spov.org, but it is necessary to add that these are information portal, not those of extension services. It is also proper to add here that according to the Article 68 of the Council Regulations No 1698/2005, the Czech Republic is obliged to establish, and that before the December 31, 2008, a national rural network, subject to the European Network for Rural development (article 67 of the Council Regulations No 1698/2005). Its founder (the Ministry of Agriculture of the Czech Republic) had allocated the sum of approx. 7.2 millions EUR for the period 2007–2013, in the frame of the Measure V.2 (Establishment and management of the national rural network).

¹⁰The aim of the project was to contribute to the realisation of the idea of sustainable development of the countryside by establishing and managing six extension services centres for rural development in the partner communes in the Liberec region. Guaranty of the project was the Společnost pro Jizerské hory, o.p.s. and the project partners were the communes Turnov, Smržovka, Frýdlant, Jilemnice, Dubá a Česká Lípa, the Liberec region, the Agency of the Nature and Countryside Protection Czech Republic (CHKO Jizerské hory, Lužické hory, Český ráj, Kokořínsko) and the Krkonoše National Park management. The project was financed by the European Social Fund and the CR state budget (via the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and the Ministry of Environment) and was of a limited duration (1.8.2005–31.7.2007). During that period, six workplaces supporting rural development worked in the Liberec region, offering consulting, information and assistance in the fields of countryside care and information on protected natural areas, organic agriculture and local production, including public into the decision-making processes (see <http://www.prvo.cz>).

and financed by non-governmental organisations or foundations).

Education is a process of acquiring knowledge in the form of learning facts, certain abilities and practices. It is connected with the endeavour of integration into the given culture and society and the active contribution to its development (Veký sociologický slovník 1996). Education is a life-long process starting the “initial education” provided by the education system. After that, there might follow the “further education” (Šťastnová 2002). In addition to mentioned ones, there exist also alternative concepts of education (e.g. the theory of filter or the theory of signals¹¹). The ability to utilise the acquired “non-tangible capital” collected by the actor in the frame of his/her life, forms the potential which the actor uses according to his/her abilities e.g. in the organisation of the activities of “animating” the life in the rural areas. The knowledge of human potential and its development trends is necessary to be utilised in setting the development strategies of rural regions (Svatošová 2008).

THE METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH AND DATA COLLECTING

In 2006, the Sociological Laboratory worked on the project Extension Service for Rural Development

supported by the Ministry of Agriculture of the Czech Republic. In the frame of this project, the research was conducted in several phases during the last three months of 2006. At the beginning, the sociological empirical research was performed using the quantitative approach, latter on, to supplement and to precise the quantitatively gathered data, the quantitative approach was combined with the qualitative approach (see e.g. Disman 1993, etc.). Therefore, first the quantitative survey (questionnaire) and semi-standardised interviews were used and then the qualitative non-standardised interviews and focus groups were utilised. This article is built exclusively on the data collected by the focus groups (further FG) in two localities, in Protivín (České Budějovice region) a Třebenice (Ústí nad Labem region).

The preparation of the research (group interviews) consisted in (1) setting the topics for the interview itself, (2) the choice of the appropriate place in the selected regions of České Budějovice and Ústí nad Labem and (3) in the selection of such people in the local community the roles of which would correspond most closely to the role of the local actors. Therefore, the respondents were selected among the mayors, representatives of the Union of Municipalities or the local active groups (further LAG), entrepreneurs (small businessmen, private farmers), or other important people of the local life (primary school headmaster,

Table 1. Structure of the discussion groups in Třebenice (T) and Protivín (P) – socio-demographic characteristics, interest in the development of the municipality and the countryside, and position of the respondent – opening description

		T	P			T	P
Gender	man	7	7	Interest of the respondent in the development of the commune and countryside*	high	8	7
	woman	3	3		middle	1	3
Age	30–44	2	3		low	1	0
	45–59	5	4	local administration	4+1**	2	
	60+	3	3	businessmen	3	2	
Education	lower professional	1	1	Position Function Membership	Union of Municipalities and LAG	5	3
	secondary	5	4		activists of clubs and associations	4	6
	university	4	5		important occupation	2	2

* Structuring was done by the researches on the base of the respondents statements during the research

**One of the actors stated that he was the Town Office in Třebenice worker but did not further specify his position. Notwithstanding this not precise statement, he was in the following table included among the respondents from the community management

Source: Sociological Laboratory and the STEM agency, report of the Focus Groups, adapted

¹¹The filter theory is interested in the selective function of education and creates a different understanding of economic analyse in the area of education. The theory of signals is interested in the information level and decision-making of the participants in labour market (Soukup 2007).

Table 2. Detailed characteristics of the local actors – respondents in the discussion groups' activities

Activity of local acting	Local actor										P ₁	P ₂	P ₃	P ₄	P ₅	P ₆	P ₇	P ₈	P ₉	P ₁₀					
mayor											x														
vice-mayor																				x					
deputy												x													
worker of Town Office																					x				
Union of Municipalities (Microregion)																									
Integro											x										x				
Blanicko-otavský																					x				
"Vodňanská ryba"																					x				
Euroregion																									
Podkrušnohoří																					x				
Union of Municipalities																									
SONO												x													
Interest association																									
Union of Towns and Municipalities																									
SERVISO c.a.*																					x				
"Třebenické ženy"																					x				
"Sokol"																					x				
Table tennis																									
Hunters																									
Culture																					x				
Tourists																					x				
Civil associations																									
"Český granát"																					x				
Genius loci Sutomis																					x				
Other important characteristics**																									
											BP	JZ	R	PT	P	SZ	BT	D	ZA	F	T	U	P	BR	LP

* SERVISO, c. a. – supplies extension services (i.e. organisational, information and other) to communes and to the microregion INTEGRO

**Explanation of other important characteristics: BP = former entrepreneur (trade with agricultural products), now retired, JZ = secretary of agricultural company R = primary school headmaster, P = entrepreneur, PT = entrepreneur (transport), SZ = private farmer, ZA = agricultural agency employee, F = Roman Catholic priest, U = primary school teacher, BR = former director of company, now retired, LP = forest projects engineer, T = technician, BT = former technician, now retired, D = retired

Source: Authors' own research

teacher, priest). The final choice of the respondents was (for different reasons) changed several times, so that finally the number of ten respondents was achieved for both groups, the characteristics of which is given below. Together with the researchers, also the representatives of the STEM (Czech public poll agency) agency were taking part in it. They participated in the quantitative data gathering.

The focus groups started by the welcoming presentation of the participants and the moderator. They always tackled five topics, which were discussed under the sensitive leadership of the moderator for 90 minutes each. The topics regarded the life in rural areas, the programs and supports for rural areas, extension services and the evaluation of life in urban and rural areas¹². The final set of respondents' structure was as follows (Table 1).

Both groups of respondents can be characterised according to two factors, the socio-demographic factor and roles. The formed discussion groups showed only minor differences regarding the socio-demographic indices. Among the active representatives of public life, women were represented (at least in these two groups) by one third, compared to two thirds of men. However, this fact did not play an important role in discussing the set topics, as women were (namely in the Protivín group) basically the strongest participants (*vide infra*). Both groups of respondents had also a similarly proportional structure of all three age groups (the category 45–59 only slightly prevailed over the other two). Ninety per cent of respondents were secondary schools or university graduates – secondary schools prevailed in the “Protivín team“, while university education in the Třebenice one.

The sums in the right down quarter of the Table 2 do not add the total number of respondents in the FG. This discrepancy reflects the basic characteristic of the respondents, which are the multiple roles they fulfil in the local community. The position, function or engagement of most of them (i.e. their roles) can be included into several role characteristics at the

same time (e.g. the entrepreneur is also the mayor, the local deputy is a member of the hunters club or of the Union Municipalities etc.). This point is so important for the discussion group characteristics (from the discussed viewpoint) that a part of the Table 1 including the position, function and membership of all actors was further elaborated in Table 2, so that the valuable information on multiple activities of the Protivín and Třebenice actors was not lost.

Into the basic characteristic of both groups of respondents, we can also include their activity shown during the group discussion. According to the number of the registered statements¹³, the most active respondent in Třebenice was the respondent T₁₀, whose statements amounted almost to 1/3 of the total number of all statements. Together with the respondent T₁ (21% of statements) and the respondent T₉ (almost 17% statements), these were the three dominant respondents with together 2/3 of all statements. Other respondents complemented the statements of the three most pronounced discussants by the remaining one third of the statements (see Table 3). An almost identical situation occurred also in Protivín, where three strong disputers¹⁴ (P₃, P₄ and P₇) dominated the discussion with also almost 2/3 of all statements.

The orientation characteristic can be further developed by considering (counting) the number of words uttered by each respondent. For the discussion group in Třebenice, the strongest disputers are still, regarding the number of words, the same respondents (T₁, T₉ a T₁₀). The only difference is that their shares in the whole discussion will still increase and that up to three-fourth. The Protivín strong disputers group, however, will change when considering the number of words uttered, so that the three strongest actors (P₃, P₄ a P₇) will still represent the share of 2/3 (as when considering the number of statements), but the respondent P₄ will be replaced by P₆.

The description of the set of respondents can be concluded by the evaluation of the activity of the moderator who led both discussions. In the Protivín FG,

¹²A part of the FG were collages. These followed always the first topic and lasted approx. for 15 minutes. The respondents were supposed to express visually, through a collage, their idea of the future in the next 10 years. For this, the respondents were divided into three sub-groups, which worked independently and had always to their disposal the identical set of pictures, photos and magazines. The collages were part of the FG, but because the ideas of the future of the countryside are not part of the research neither the aim of this article, they will not be further analysed. However, the authoress felt the need to mention that a certain part of the FG was not spent directly by the discussion.

¹³The statements/answers of the respondents are perceived as the individual responses, which were heard during the discussion to the topics (as the individual answers to the questions asked), without regard to the time the respondent needed to express his/her opinion through the statement. A more precise, even if still of an orientation value, is the total number of words pronounced during the group discussion by each respondent. The indicators, the number of statements as well as the number of words, serve only for the orientation in the discussion procedure.

¹⁴The three strongest disputers were, according to the number of statements, women.

Table 3. Statement of respondents – basic orientation

Třebenice					Protivín				
Resp.	Number of statements		Number of words		Resp.	Number of statements		Number of words	
	absolute	relative (%)	absolute	relative (%)		absolute	relative (%)	absolute	relative (%)
T ₁	18	18.95	950	16.33	P ₁	1	0.81	22	0.38
T ₂	1	1.05	171	2.94	P ₂	5	4.07	425	7.40
T ₃	5	5.26	222	3.82	P ₃	40	32.52	2589	45.05
T ₄	8	8.42	528	9.08	P ₄	18	14.63	444	7.73
T ₅	2	2.11	62	1.07	P ₅	8	6.50	249	4.33
T ₆	6	6.32	104	1.79	P ₆	9	7.32	495	8.61
T ₇	6	6.32	157	2.70	P ₇	19	15.45	717	12.48
T ₈	5	5.26	178	3.06	P ₈	8	6.50	390	6.79
T ₉	16	1.84	1 326	22.80	P ₉	9	7.32	323	5.62
T ₁₀	28	29.47	2 118	36.42	P ₁₀	6	4.88	93	1.62
Total	95	100.00	5 816	100.00	Total	123	100.00	5 747	100.00

Source: Author's own calculation

the moderator needed to use twice as many words as in the Třebenice FG. The discussion group in Třebenice was more lively and willing to discuss, so that there was less need for the moderator to explain and to promote the discussion. It was easier for him to get the statements/opinions to the discussed topics, and that namely because of the higher preparedness and willingness of the respondents to enter the discussion.

DIFFERENT POSITIONS OF THE COUNTRYSIDE – ANALYSIS OF THE FG RESULTS

For the analysis of the results collected by the focus group, there was used the open coding (Hendl 2005), through which the categories/subcategories were formed. The aim of the coding is the thematic disclosure of the collected data/texts as a whole or of the individual cases. It serves for revealing the themes or the categories (subthemes/subcategories) which are included in the data. The developed categories/subcategories are then further defined/characterised through their properties (i.e. they get their dimensions). The properties help to distinguish the events falling into one category/subcategory (Hendl 2005).

Countryside as a space for life

a) Availability of various forms of access in the countryside

The local actors (respondents) in both group discussions reflected both the positive as well as negative dimensions the countryside offers as a place for living. Moreover, the countryside is characterised by the respondents rather as the way of life¹⁵ than for its geographical or demographic delimitation. Based on the open coding, it was decided not to compare both localities but to evaluate the answers of respondents together, as they did not differ considerably in both localities.

For countryside as a place for life, one central category of availability of the various forms of access (shortened as the availability of the countryside) was developed. It should be understood both in the positive as well as negative sense, as it scored both positive and negative evaluating statements of the local actors/respondents. The category of availability of the countryside (as a place for living) acquires the following qualities:

- availability of environment (place for children, nature)
- availability of freedom and peace

¹⁵E.g.: T₉: ...it is a question of choice, how this man wants to live, for me countryside is the place where I am in contact with nature, where I am not limited by architecture, where there is space for developing my concrete ideas and interests...

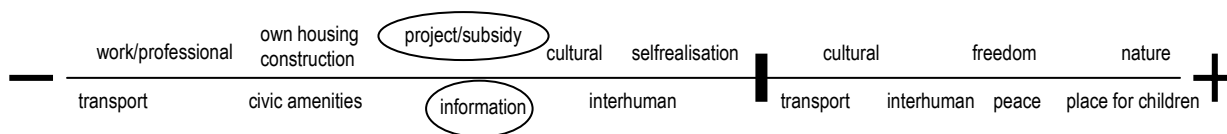


Figure 1. Availability of various forms of access in the countryside

Source: Author's own research

- personal availability (professional/in work, self-realisation, interhuman)
- infrastructural accessibility (transport, civil equipment)
- availability of the possibility to build off own place of housing,
- cultural availability
- availability of projects/subsidies
- availability of information.

The qualities of the category are depicted on the axis of positives (+) and negatives (-) (see below), and according to the statements of the respondents during the FG (Figure 1).

Some of the accessibility qualities are evaluated by the respondents as “contradictory”. Such a quality achieves both negative and positive dimension and is depicted on the axis of positives and negatives twice – once in the negative, second time in the positive part of the axis. Namely, it regards the transport, inter-human and cultural quality of accessibility¹⁶ which reached in both localities positive as well as negative evaluation.

“On the first level”, the respondents are satisfied with living in the countryside and only “on the second level” they find comments or exceptions, regarding namely public transport, infrastructure, lack of job opportunities, depopulation, ageing of the population, few opportunities for young people, little chance to get own housing, but also the unfavourable tax redistribution for small communes, problems in getting subsidies to agriculture etc.

Further, we will be interested in that form of the countryside accessibility directly connected with the information and extension services for rural areas.

Availability of projects/subsidies

One of the features of availability as of various forms of access in the countryside is the availability of projects/subsidies. The project and subsidy are mutually interdependent as granting of the subsidy precedes the successful finishing of the project. The subcategory “project” of the project/subsidy availability of the countryside got its dimension by the respondents of both groups in the frame of the whole discussion by a very wide range of expressions and descriptions. Because the answers of respondents in both localities in the subcategory “project” slightly differ, it was possible to compare them. It can be stated that the Protivín respondents perceived projects, their preparation and searching for the potential of success in a more critical, sceptical way. They rather “looked for the problems” connected with the projects and “cried over” their problems. On the other hand, the Třebenice discussion group members were more optimistic in their evaluation in the sense that they expressed the opinions that even if projects are not easy to create and the certainty of their successfulness in minimum, still it is necessary to overcome the problems, so that new projects were prepared based on the already successful ones¹⁷.

According to the dimensions of the subcategory “project” the respondents (who know the procedure

¹⁶E.g.: T₉: ... bad transport network, but then just now transport is good in the region..., P₇:...it is all rather good regarding that transport network..., P₁₀:...on the other hand culture is missing here..., P₃: ... during the 11 years we are here, so I have seen theatres that I almost had not seen in Prague... P₃: ... people are terribly closed here, they do not like to accept new contacts, do not start them..., T₁₀: ...also that relationship of people, which is friendly...

¹⁷The Protivín people also used the for the subcategory project the following features: non-functional, insufficient, passable/non-passable (technically prepared so that it could function), bureaucratic (from the legislation viewpoint, with the need to collect many documents, with the list of necessary documents), passing (through legislation, to be passed by administration, just the structure controlled, the procedure very important), being in the project “pipeline” on the table (for a long time – even six months, for insufficiency, for complicated and oversized legislation), regarding the Union of Municipalities. The projects are also limited (by money, impossibility to process the project, complicated preparation, insufficient co-operation, non-functioning information system).

how to get grants from various programs) criticised the complicated and demanding administration on the Czech side rather than on the EU side. Further, they criticised the non-transparent rules (different for different ministries and changed during the year) or the non-accessibility of credits (contrary to the banks abroad, Czech banks are very hesitating to cooperate with the regions, municipalities and entrepreneurs). The problem is in the system of the partial financing through the project and also in the co-financing of the project documentation. The terms of the individual application call are not clear (for a long time, it is not clear whether the call will be opened or not), then there follow a very short terms for the preparation and submitting of the application and on the other hand, a very long term for their evaluation. The local actors then feel rather constrained of not being able to utilise the offered funds.

The subcategory of project/subsidy of availability as of various forms of access in the countryside "support from the region" was also evaluated differently by the selected actors of the local social life – the region Ústí nad Labem does not regard the development of rural areas as their priority, while the region České Budějovice granted the bridge financing support for the LAG activities. The common opinion is that the mayors of the communes lack the possibility to influence the activities on the regional level.

Information availability – the dimension referring to the needs of extension services for the countryside as a space for life

This dimension was further analysed on the base of the acquired data. The subcategory "information" was created, which was further developed into its dimensions. In its features, we can distinguish four levels. The first level refers to the acquiring information in itself, the second and third regard the quality of information and the fourth spreading of information. For getting information, the local actors utilise above all personal contacts and the virtual environment, however, the crucial share in getting the information is generated through the participation of the actor in the social networks. The necessary information

is then often acquired in the way when the actor searches for the needed information. Usually it cannot be got from the official authorities (e.g. the town office). Neither the personal contacts nor the virtual environment can guarantee the necessary quantity (non-sufficient amount of information, low amount of information) or the needed quality of information (information is not exhausting, it is incomplete, non-reliable). Quantity and quality then express two further features of the subcategory "information". The fourth level of the subcategory information refers on their spreading. The local actors mentioned the non-possibility or difficult possibility of information not only in the direction from the centre down to the local level, but also in the opposite direction. Moreover, this difficulty to pass information sometimes works even among the local actors themselves.

Based on the above mentioned, all the "negative" levels of the subcategory information can form yet another independent subcategory of the information accessibility of countryside, and that the subcategory the "obstacles to information". On one side, the obstacle to information is in the information process itself as the actors have to search for it by themselves and with difficulties (they have to go after information). It is also not always possible to ensure the sufficient scope (quantity) and quality of information. The subcategory "obstacles to information" can achieve also a further dimension, which is spreading of the information. This subcategory of the obstacles to information is identical with the feature of the spreading of information of the subcategory information and will not be further analysed. However, it has to be included among the obstacles to information.

However, in both discussion groups (even notwithstanding the above mentioned obstacles/problems); there slightly prevailed the opinion that there is (probably) a sufficient amount of information. It is, however, necessary to create a functioning, reliable and simple systematic complex ("institute"), which the actors could contact if they had clear goals of their activities. This complex should offer services from supplying information and extension services in the preparation/writing of a project (i.e. from the idea to project documentation and the subsequent

On the other hand, the Třebenice respondents used for the subcategory project, among other, the following characteristics: complicated (for an ordinary person to prepare, but a subsidy could be get for it e.g. from the Joint Regional Operaiton Programme funded by EU structural funds under the National Development Plan), interesting (e.g. LEADER), co-operative (with partners abroad, e.g. the Community Initiative INTERREG, or with the Saxon mirror participation), prepared (the title Czech Entrepreneur in Germany, German Entrepreneur in the Czech Republic), proceeding communications to business objects supported by the Czech Ministry of Regional Development or the bio-electricity plant in the village). The main goal for the Třebenice respondents are the common projects (which are done with the help of the Serviso), also the workers of the implementation agencies are sometimes contacted.

building consent or any other documents necessary for preparing the subsidy application) to the application prepared on the professional level, up to the monitoring of the project realisation, the administration connected with its evaluation and accounting for the provider of the grant.

If such a complex is created (e.g. in the frame of the local action group or the union of municipalities in relation to the “service firm” which manages this on the professional level), rural areas are able to successfully utilise the offered subsidy possibilities. If it is not created, the flow of information from the top down is hindered, people are waiting for the help from the top¹⁸ and are becoming passive¹⁹ (because the activity of people falls down if there are no results visible) and they start to accuse each other for blocking the information where to get the funds²⁰. And further, if such a complex is not created, it seems that the local actors themselves, who have information and are willing to spread them, doubt if the others know about them and their services. The reason of the insufficient information of the citizens and the potential project submitters is then seen by the “potential suppliers of information “ in the non-existent knowledge about their existence (as the information is not further distributed from the side of the ministries, regions, but also the mayors). The aid is then not perceived either on the inhabitants living in the locality side or on the side of the local actors themselves.

b) People inhabiting the rural space

Another category is formed by the people inhabiting the rural areas. The features of the category “people”, which was part of the group discussions in both localities, forms dichotomic couples in most cases. According to its features (based on the statements of the respondents), rural population can be perceived in several levels. The most expressive analysed feature are people leaving the countryside and people are coming to the countryside. The discussing actors felt the need to prevent the depopulation of the countryside, so that there are not left only the old people while the young ones should have the incentive to stay. The old

and the young thus form a further dichotomic feature. Simultaneously, and that is also one of the ideas of the rural development, the actors want to attract the people to the countryside (e.g. by an advantage in building a family house or a tax alleviation).

Human relationships were evaluated as controversial (therefore, they are depicted at the above axis both on the positive and negative side), and that by another controversial characteristic – good and bad people. This dimension is complemented by other categories of “people”. These categories are people closed, careful, not trusting, looking after their own and forming friendly contacts only after several years, but also friendly people organising common activities for their fellow-citizens. Therefore, there was not a unanimous opinion on human relationships among the respondents of both FG, since the actors had their own experience both with open and closed people (this is a further characteristic of the dichotomic character of human relationships).

The category people spans above two other important features. “People” as the rural areas inhabitants are also dependent people (on the car, the mobile shop, commuting to job, to culture and education). People (and here the category people merges with the category information accessibility) are often little informed or not knowing where to get the information.

Countryside as the space with development potential

There is a question based on the analysis according to the category of availability as of various forms of access in the countryside: is this category connected to its development? For example, if the information availability of the countryside as the space of life improves, will it help the development of the countryside? Or, if the above mentioned functioning complex supplying information and extension services is created, will it help the local actors (as the “local space inhabitants²¹”) really to fulfil efficiently their ideas connected with the development of the localities they act in?

¹⁸P₈: ...so people from some ministry should come here and inform those people what are the possibilities ...like you came today...

¹⁹P₄: ...alas, there is too little activity among people, so that it is practically impossible to expect from our people that the initiative would come from somebody who himself wants to get somewhere...

²⁰P₃: ...I do not know why the people are not informed ... we are trying ... to help farmers, businessmen, and then nobody comes, they de facto have no idea about it. Why do not these mayors spread the information? We cannot go everywhere....

²¹Here the quotation marks are on purpose since the actor of countryside development can be both individual and collective.

An independent category of development activity, in which the respondents see the development potential of their locality, was then created. Both groups do not differ in stating of the qualities forming the dimensions of the “development activity” category. It regards the infrastructure development activities (water supply, sewage, and gas), labour (offer of jobs, commuting). Further, the modernising development activities have two levels, and that the public ones (modernisation of the public equipment, like children playgrounds, sport facilities, renewal of school) or private ones (mainly the reconstruction of old houses). Development activities are also seen in keeping the young people in the countryside, sustaining of agriculture, nature protection and environment quality protection.

In the category of development activities, we could perceive a slight difference among the localities in the opinion where and how to create job opportunities. The representatives of local initiatives in Třebenice have a clear idea – to concentrate on the development of tourism (which is given by their position in the České středohoří) including agro-tourism and rural tourism services²² (accommodation, catering etc.), growing energy plants, improving the look of the rural space and the individual communes. In the Protivín group, there were rather visible some doubts and uncertainty. The proposals of the possible development activities were doubted before they could have been properly developed.

CONCLUSION

The central questions the contribution aimed at answering were: *What is the role of extension and information services? How do the “potential actors of rural development perceive the role of extension and information in their activities?* Its aim was the outline of the relevant topics through the opinions of local actors regarding the countryside and its development using the example of two different localities (the regions Ústí nad Labem and České Budějovice), and that with the help of the qualitative sociological research done by the focus groups.

It can be concluded that the selected local actors from Třebenice and Protivín look at the countryside from the perspective of three categories. The category of accessibility and the category people characterise the countryside as the space for living, while the

category development activities as the space of development potential. The analysis was primarily aimed at the category of accessibility, and that regarding its two dimensions – availability of project/subsidy and availability of information, as these are closely connected to the subject of this article, which is the role of extension and information services for the rural areas development.

Local actors confirm that there are sources and the necessary information needed for the operation of their communities. However, they are scarce, insufficient and their distribution on the local level is not appropriate. In the Protivín discussion group, this lack is perceived more in the sense “we have information, but the possibility is not such as it could be and the interest is not as we would expect”. In the Třebenice group, it was then perceived in the sense “information exists, but we have to search for them with difficulties and to save them”. If there is an actor/subject (e.g. the LAG group, civil society or the like) who is embedded in the appropriate social networks through which the information is disseminated in the satisfactory way (it covers the whole locality or the social networks of the local actors), then the information is also utilised well, provided the social networks disseminate also the information about the actor. It is remarkable that just the Ústecký region (North Bohemia) actors can (at least it seems so from the analysed FG) utilise their contacts in a more natural way than the South Bohemia actors, when the latter is known by its dense network of contacts among the institutions (Vajdová, Pospíšilová 2007, Vajdová, Stachová 2007).

Local actors understand the complexity of their acting to the benefit of rural development in the sense of the difficult (rather in Protivín) orientation in the issues related to project management and the hardly accessible possibilities to get subsidies from the national or European resources for their region. On the other hand, the local actors also understand that these activities are much easier (rather Třebenice) if they already got some experience with the programs (i.e. if they know at least partially the mechanism of their functioning). Then the acquiring of the means for the locality development is (at least at present) is functioning. Acquiring of the means is supported namely by the already created “background”. For example that can be represented by the local administration workers implemented in the service organizations, the unions of municipalities, LAG or

²²T₁₀: ... at present it is being re-oriented at the development of cyclo-tourism, tourism and eco-agritourism, as agriculture is at the decline... ...we are trying to create an area interesting for tourists, to secure all services... ...we are well aware that we are just at the beginning of that...

another interrelation. Important is the aspect of the local actors' personal network.

If the existing (in our case the Třebenice) local background is positively acting in the development activities, we can suppose that connecting of such individually functioning "backgrounds" into a whole "national background" is the prerequisite for the rural development. All that would then be made easier by a network interconnecting the individual "backgrounds" and supplying extension and information services for the countryside (and not just for the agricultural actors for which it at present functions).

The respondents also confirm that the creation of information, (better to say extension network) is practically a sine qua non for the creation of activities connected with the locality development and its role in acquiring information is non-substitutable. If the information/extension centre is missing, the passivity and apathy might increase. There emerges the passive thinking about who is guilty of blocking information. ***How, then, a functioning and efficient (reliable, simple, systematic) complex ("institute") can be created, the role of which would be to form an information and extension net for the rural development needs?***

According to the Article 68 (National rural network) of the Council Regulations (EC) No 1698/2005, the Czech Republic is obliged to establish, and that before the December 31, 2008²³, a National Rural Network, subject to the European Network for Rural Development. Its founder (the Ministry of Agriculture of the Czech Republic) had allocated the sum of approx. 7.2 millions EUR for the period 2007–2013 in the frame of the Measure V.2 (Establishment and management of the national rural network). In the Measure V.2 states, among other: "...in the frame of the establishing and functioning of the National Network for the Countryside ... technical assistance will be also used for establishing and functioning of the network of specialists with the aim to support the exchange of expert information and the support for the implementation and evaluation of the rural development policy..." (RDP, p. 148).

It will be, therefore, good to analyze if the mentioned Network (built in the frame of Technical Assistance) will supply a quality information "background" and extension services for the rural development, if it will cover the needs to acquire a sufficient amount of information and if it will secure the possibility and spreading of information (both bottom-up and top-down). It will also be good to observe if the impacts of the established network will help to remedy the shortcomings in the

low information level of the local/countryside actors in performing development activities, which were discovered during the analysis of the Focus Groups. Such impacts should then be expected.

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²³See comment No. 9 (the conclusion of the theoretical part of this article).

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Arrived on 2nd December 2008

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