

Changes in the life situation of rural households

Zmeny v životnej situácii vidieckych domácností

D. MORAVČÍKOVÁ, M. HANOVÁ

Slovak University of Agriculture, Nitra, Slovak Republic

Abstract: The paper deals with the characteristics of common life situation of rural households in comparison with the period before 1989. It compares the situation of rural households in three regions - districts of Slovakia, which are different from geographical, demographic, cultural and economic point of view. Moreover, the paper evaluates the changes in various levels of relationships, the changes in the life of a local society and the subsidy phenomenon. The sociological and empirical research was carried out in 18 rural municipalities of district Topoľčany, Senec and Sabinov. The techniques used in the research were as follows: a standardized interview followed by the questionnaires, observation and document analysis. The analysis of the collected data concerning the greatest changes in the period of society transformation from the point of view of respondents is also a very important part of the paper as well as the comparison of the rural households adaptation with respect to the overall regional situation.

Key words: life situation, rural households, adaptation to transformation process, empirical research

Abstrakt: Článok sa zaoberá jednotlivými oblasťami, ktoré charakterizujú súčasnú životnú situáciu vidieckych domácností v porovnaní s obdobím pred rokom 1989. Autori porovnávajú situáciu vidieckych domácností z troch regiónov – okresov Slovenska, ktoré sú polohou, priestorovou situáciou, sociodemograficky, sociokultúrne i socioekonomicky odlišné a hodnotia zmeny v rôznych úrovniach vzťahov, zmeny v živote lokálneho spoločenstva a fenomén výpomoci. Objektom výskumu je 18 vidieckych obcí z okresov Topoľčany, Senec a Sabinov, kde sa uskutočnil sociologický empirický výskum, v ktorom boli využité techniky štandardizovaného rozhovoru podľa dotazníka, pozorovania a analýzy dokumentov. Analýza získaných dát vyhodnocuje, v ktorých zo sledovaných oblastí respondenti pociťujú a prežívajú najrozsiahlejšie zmeny v období spoločenskej transformácie a porovnávajú mieru adaptability vidieckych domácností v závislosti od celkovej situácie regiónu.

Kľúčové slová: životná situácia, vidiecke domácnosti, adaptácia na transformačný proces, empirický výskum

INTRODUCTION

People think that the most important changes out of all changes running the world are those which affect them directly and interfere with the life of families and households, in the relationships with the nearest surroundings and in the sphere of self-reflection. This process is uneven in different geographical areas and socio-cultural environments. The post-socialistic transformation of Slovak society is a part of a long-lasting process of modernization. During these changes, lifestyle and the culture of population is becoming modified, which is caused not only by economical, political and social movements in our society but also by the process of integration and globalisation. Some new topics start to be more dominant. For instance, problems like considering the

rate of how much these changes in people's lifestyles are caused by the governmental economic pressure; how much they are rational (or more rational), how the social status of individuals and groups is being changed, the ability to evaluate it in the local surroundings, what an individual, group (a household, a family) is allowed to do considering their local prestige, etc. The answers to the above questions may be collected in two ways. Either by reviewing and comparison of objective material differences in lifestyle and its level, by demographic structure and migrations, economic situation, employment, the regional and local political life and activities, cultural facilities, or by the interpretation of changes which originates in a personal experience and evaluation of local and overall social reality done by the people themselves.

Different types of rural settlements¹ with their specific social structure modify the progress from traditional to modern, affect living strategies and flexibility of population, influence the relationships among relatives and neighbours, etc. All these processes happen in terms of outer social horizon and lead to the individualised relationships, splitted-up groups, such as local community, neighbourhood, rural family and household, as well as to the parallel qualitatively “new” community and “new” social agreement. Partially, this paper will attempt to answer the question of perceiving and considering the multilevel changes in the lives of rural households members in three regions, which are different from their socio-spatial, socio-demographical, socio-cultural and socio-economical point of view. The life situation of rural households is understood here as a complex of various spheres, in which the different acceptance and reactions to the transformation process are expressed. The collected data are compared within three groups of rural households divided according to their regional relevancy and connected with three topics. The first one concerns the common living situation inside the rural households – how do their members feel about the results of social changes in several spheres²; the second one reflects the situation in a local society, namely which elements of the life are changed and how are these changes subjectively sensed and the last one is focused on the subsidy phenomenon in the rural space, i.e. which spheres need more or less help after 1989, and which subjects are its main addressees or providers.

SPECIFICS OF FAMILY AND HOUSEHOLD SITUATION IN SLOVAKIA

From the beginning of 90s it is possible to observe great changes in the demographic movement in Slovakia. They can be ascribed to the transition to the new model of reproductive behaviour. The structure of inhabitants is changed, an average size of a household is on the decrease, families have fewer children, and the way of coexistence is changed and there is a growing number of single, unmarried people.. Analysis concerning the situation of families and households shows the similarities with the demographic regional situation in many aspects. This

situation is globally not very favourable but at the same time, it is regionally very different. It may be characterized by the decrease in the number of children in families, decrease in the number of families with higher number of children and a remarkable growth of the share of incomplete families. The growth in the number of families with more children occurs in regions with high unemployment rate as one of the reactions to the unemployment (especially unemployment of women). It is also the way how to guarantee an income for the family. Incomplete families occur mainly in big cities (Gajdoš, Pašiak 1995). A simplified view divides Slovakia into progressive north and east and regressive south and west. This is the result of historical, cultural and sectarian differences and the differences in living standards and life patterns, too. The rate of urbanization is also a very important factor and the differences between the population behaviour in urban and rural space are obvious in all parts of Slovakia (Vaňo 2003).

Rural surroundings is generally characterized by closer social network and less individualization of social relationships in the particular levels of its social structure in comparison with the urban surroundings, rural population varies from urban population also in the system of the family management (Blažek 1998). Nowadays, 44% of Slovaks live in rural space and the rural settlements are the crucial units in Slovak settlement structure³. It is necessary to deal with the countryside, which is being modernised at present. It is much more socially differentiated, stratified and thus more heterogeneous. Furthermore, it is becoming more democratic, dynamic and liberal. The traditional Slovak village was interconnected not only by neighbourly, cooperative and other social relationships. There were created the relationships of dependency between families within the village, which were forced by various forms (e.g. by husband or godfather choice, by common entertainments, etc.). In this way, the agglutinated society regulates the family life and vice-versa only families, which were opened to this society, were able to retroact it (Botíková et al. 1997). There are some social problems, which occur more in the transformation period, such as a falling-off social atmosphere and interpersonal relationships in the village, growth of the criminality, growth of the unemployment and problems connected with their solving, the reduction of cultural and social

¹Also ad effectum the terms *venkov* and *vonkov* by Štefánek (1945).

²Valuation of living situation is oriented on the period before and after 1989.

³Municipalities up to 1 000 inhabitants constitute 68%, municipalities up to 2000 inhabitants 87% (about one third of all inhabitants is living there) and rural settlements globally 95% from all settlements in Slovakia (Statistical Office of the SR 2001).

life, constantly more complicated providing of the suitable level of living conditions, deepening of the socio-economical differentiation of the local society, low engagement of inhabitants, entrepreneurs, associations and organisations in the local problems solving, local identity loss, etc. (Gajdoš 2002).

Sociological research conducted in the Slovak countryside (in the mid 90s) outlines different adaptation strategies in the villages with traditional family behaviour and modern family behaviour⁴ (Gurán et al. 1997). Life pattern and economic activities of the inhabitants were more adherent to the agriculture in the villages with the traditional family behaviour, which means stronger time succession and larger reciprocal subsidy. These villages were less socially opened with lower mobility of inhabitants, socio-economical relationships were more markedly destroyed which results in the significant oscillation of a running life pattern. New strategies of economic provision occurred only sometimes, prompt solution of arising situation (e.g. one year of work abroad) was preferred more than a long-time solution. Families in this type of villages are characterized by a higher intensity of an intra-family help and by several savings steps related especially to the self-supplying and housing (multi-generational housing). According to Buchta (2003) and Blaas (1999), the penetrative increase of the self-supplying activities reacts naturally on the reduced purchasing power, spaces an extra-work time and makes self-realization possible. Apart from the positive economic aspects, this return to the family management has also a significant social aspect – namely the rehabilitation and revitalization of the multi-generational rural family with the social necessity of the older generation in this type of family.

A higher cohesion with the industrial small-scale production occurred in the villages with modern family behaviour (especially in the suburban areas or rich agricultural areas). Social control was weak mainly due to a lesser family and village interconnection due to larger conjunction of the rural life pattern. The traditional entrepreneur's "spirit" (handicrafts, agricultural small-scale production and market) was revitalized more often. With respect to the bigger accumulated wealth, there occurred a more intensive adaptability and motion to run a business and

become independent. An intra-family help started to be more intensive in several spheres and focused mainly on the financial help, the care of children and household. The trend of multi-generational housing slowed down.

EMPIRICAL RESEARCH OF RURAL HOUSEHOLD ADAPTATION TO TRANSFORMATION PROCESS

This paper presents a part of the international research project *Rural Household Adaptation to Transformation Process in Central Europe*. It was realized during the period 2000–2004 in agricultural universities in Poland, Hungaria and Slovakia⁵ within the ambit of their institutional research projects. Selected departments⁶ of the Slovak Agricultural University in Nitra, the University of P.J. Šafárik in Prešov and the Comenius University in Bratislava took part at the household survey.

Methods of the empirical research

The implementation of a few gradual steps resulted in the final selection of surveyed surroundings. The character as well as data and information achieved from the research cannot be generalized for the whole rural population in Slovakia – it is a case study of the rural space in three Slovak districts (Senec, Topoľčany and Sabinov) where the central city is not bigger than 30 000 inhabitants. The selected districts were chosen to represent various geographical, demographical, socio-economical and socio-cultural micro-regions in the most significant way. These regions should reflect the essential dimensions of social differences in the Slovak countryside. According to the collective convention, in the preparatory stage of the research, there were 6 rural villages chosen randomly from each selected district. The survey was conducted by means of a standardized interview according to the questionnaire in randomly selected rural households at the end of 2001 and the beginning of 2002. According to the collective convention, the rural villages represented 3 different categories – big vil-

⁴ The classification profiles villages according to the analysis of demographic and statistical data about the households – the share of complete family households, the share of multi-path and multi-generational households.

⁵ The research project was methodologically coordinated and directed by rural sociologist D. Brown from the Cornell University in USA.

⁶ Department of Regional Development, Department of Social Sciences and Department of Statistics and Operational Research (Slovak Agricultural University in Nitra), Department of Public Management (University of P.J. Šafárik in Prešov), Department of Human Geography and Demogeography (Comenius University in Bratislava).

lages (1 500 inhabitants and more), medium villages (500–1 500 inhabitants) and small villages (500 and less inhabitants). The overall number of responding households was 656⁷, the overall number of villages was 18. The methodology of sampling is shown in the below chart.

Size categories of villages	3 (big, medium and small villages)
Number of observed villages	2 from each size category
Sampling	1. randomly selection of villages 2. randomly selection of households
Number of responding households in village	proportional according to the share of the number of households in the village in the total number of households in the district
Household sample grossing up	min. 20 households in small villages

The Slovak version of the questionnaire contains, except for 47 basic questions⁸, the next 14 questions that extended the particular thematic circuits. The average time of the interview was 50 minutes, the time scale varied from 30 to 60 minutes in dependence on the household character and the age of the respondent⁹, as well as in dependence on the number of household members taking part in the interview. The interviews took place in the afternoon from Monday till Saturday.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In connection with the following interpretation of subjectively-experienced life situation in rural households, we need to briefly summarise the objective differences among the groups of rural households from 3 various regions of Slovakia collected by this research¹⁰. The highest status (Maříková 2000) evaluated according to the population quality, educational structure of households' social potential, possession and equipment criteria and their socio-economical differentiation (sector employment, unemployment, job migrations, occupation mobility of household members) was observed in the sample of households from the district of Senec compared with the households from Sabinov and Topoľčany. According to the

methodology of social-spatial analysis of SR (Gajdoš, Pašiak 1995), this corresponded to the overall situation in the interviewed districts in the given period, which was above-average in the area of Senec; some problems occurred in Topoľčany and Sabinov, which reflect the social and economical situation and the rate of modernisation shift in the region.

Spheres of rural households life situation

According to the survey¹¹, the situation got worse in all three regions. Financial conditions became worst especially in Senec. At the same time, only 12.0% stated the improvement of financial conditions. On the one hand, this can be partly a consequence of higher lifestyle expenses and costs due to the capital city very near (the town is the most modern of the surveyed territories) and on the other hand, the less lifestyle expenses in more traditional areas (it is often caused by self-supply proved by this research), or more self-restrained people in the poorer and more distant rural settlements. The second bigger problem is the lack of free time in each district, mostly in Senec. The way of spending time was alike the city model (visits of cinemas, theatres, doing some shopping, sports etc.). After the social changes, it has become more financially demanding, thus about three-times less respondents admitted that the situation improved. The increased number of economic and bureaucratic activities, which the household members have to do nowadays for provision of the necessary subsistence conditions, is ascribed to this fact. As we can see, such "quickened" life movement touched almost a half of responded households from less developed rural space of the districts Topoľčany and Sabinov, too. Much more households (about 1.5-times) in the sample from Topoľčany and Sabinov reported the worse situation, which is probably connected with the decline of health care and medicaments availability after the health care system in Slovakia had been restructured. The population is dissatisfied mainly in the rural settlements with the lack of health centres, insufficient transport infrastructure and weak material equipment of households (owning a car, etc.). The overall decline is reflected in family leaders' and members' employment problems. The situation is the worst in Senec district, which can objectively signalise

⁷ There were responding 207 rural households in the district of Topoľčany, 200 were interviewed in Sabinov and in Senec 249 rural households.

⁸ Basic version of the questionnaire was the same in Hungary, Poland and Slovakia.

⁹ Respondents were householders and other household members taking part in the interview.

¹⁰ Moravčíková (2003)

the decreasing number of employees, not the lack of them (commuting to work from other Slovak regions, higher qualification demands, etc.). The sample from Sabinov evaluates the situation the most positively. Thus, the fact shows the connection between the ability of seasonal or other jobs (illegal or abroad). The highest share of households was reported in the sample from Topolčany district as well as the over-aged population at the post-productive age.

According to the respondents, housing represents the area of lifestyle, which has improved the most. 30–47% stated this fact in comparison to 15–18% of households (the smallest share in all three surroundings) who declared that the situation has got worse. Most of houses and flats¹² of responded households were built in the period 1950–1990. At about 60% of them in Senec, 40% in Sabinov and 30% in Topolčany made some reconstructions, modifications, renewals or repairs. This also gives the evidence that there is a nationwide dramatic downturn of home building and insufficient number of flats in cities on the one side, but enhancement and renewal of houses, especially in rural settlements, through credits and loans on the other side. Younger people and people of the middle age often solve their housing problem in this way, because it is a financially reasonable way. It occurred mainly in the suburban territories where sufficient job opportunities exists and are accessible from the rural settlements because of good transport facilities and infrastructure (roads). A lot of jobs can be done at home today and this fact together with the idea of

the healthier way of the life ascribes a higher credit to the housing in the countryside than before.

Changes in the life of local society

Increasing mobility of inhabitants globally gives rise to the reduction of the value of locally bounded social relationships and networks. The value of functional groups expands and weakens the relationships originated from the territoriality base, too. It is significant that local communities first of all transformed and survived in new specific forms and in connection with the destruction of its traditional functions in favour of new ones.

The changes in relationships have been surveyed among adult household members, among each generation and among neighbours. In 80–87% of households in Topolčany and Senec, the relations remained the same. In Sabinov, only 72–77% confirmed the same fact. It is necessary to say that in the comparison of the other two surveyed regions, only the last sample reported the most multi-generation households and households with several children. As shown in the table, in the Senec sample respondents observed the most negative changes in the relationships with neighbours, which are probably connected with the ownership relations after the year 1989. The same fact occurred in the inter-generation relationships in the Sabinov sample. The social content and the previous neighbour relationships have globally changed in the

¹¹ Table 1. Evaluating of particular branches of rural households lifestyle conditions compared to the situation before 1989

Branch of household's life	Life situation of rural households (% of households)								
	improved			remained the same			got worse		
	Topolčany	Senec	Sabinov	Topolčany	Senec	Sabinov	Topolčany	Senec	Sabinov
Housing	30.0	41.5	47.3	53.2	40.5	37.6	16.8	18.0	15.1
Economical and financial conditions	15.6	12.0	26.4	25.0	20.8	20.9	59.4	67.2	52.7
Employment of household members	13.3	10.5	23.5	46.1	38.7	45.2	40.6	50.8	31.3
Employment of householder	11.9	10.1	14.5	51.6	46.9	57.0	36.5	43.0	28.5
Health of household members	3.5	1.1	7.1	55.0	70.9	50.0	41.5	28.0	42.9
Free time sufficiency	21.9	7.8	23.0	32.8	33.3	31.5	45.3	58.9	45.5

Source: Slovak Household Survey (2001)

¹² The average share in the Slovak sample was 78% of houses and 87% of flats.

long term in the Slovak society (by post-war evolution). Remarkable contemporary changes in rural municipalities of Senec are influenced predominantly by the renovation of private ownership relationships, by increasing social and demographic differentiation of the rural inhabitants structure, by the length of their housing in the given locality and by other factors. The growing intensity of inter-generation confrontations in the Sabinov sample can be attributed to the various lifestyle opinions and attitudes of the older generation towards the overall social situation and some confrontations of the behavioural models or lifestyle strategies. It is determined by the generation different linkage to the place and community and it is manifested in individual feelings and social involvement. Various visions about satisfying of the individual needs, their informativeness, societal orientation and educational level are important additional factors, too. The situational evaluating index¹³ in Figure 1 expresses the share of improved and worsened relationships.

Questions dealing with the life in the rural settlement were included in the research, too. The branch of social participation¹⁴, inter-personal relations in general and especially those connected with private possession, the work of municipality, cultural and sports facilities in the village were surveyed. The worst situation in each of three groups of households was observed in the social participation and inter-personal

relations. Thus, the population in more traditional surroundings perceive the overall individualization more sensitively as the result of modernization¹⁵.

The transformation period signals the strong polarization of the rural community, such as the property polarization, as well as social and political polarization. In this situation, most of residents prefer personal, family or group interest over the community interest. Most of residents equally perceived the necessity of the community life regeneration. In the sample from Senec, population's attitudes are the most critical towards the work of local municipality. 43.9% of households finds the problem worsening in comparison to Topolčany and Sabinov. The phenomenon of citizenship in the sense of keeping an eye on people's representatives and their assessment is related to the rate of modernizing processes within a certain surrounding. However, the utilitarian goals may not be excluded because the most households find the relations connected with private property much worsened (57.7%). Sabinov reports 27.1% and Topolčany 17.4% only.

Help requirement and its addressees

Mutual help among relatives, neighbours, and family or more distant social networks is one of the basic characteristics of the traditional Slovak village. This fact is supported by many ethnographic researches.

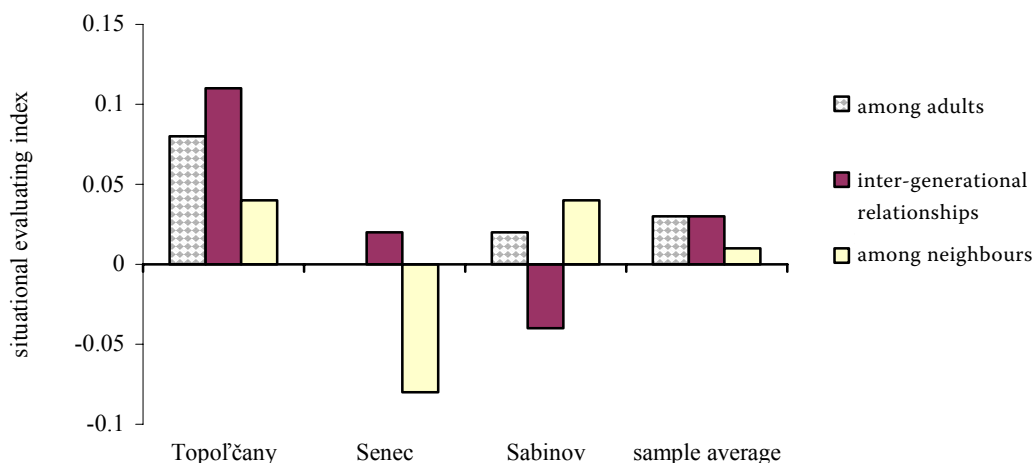


Figure 1. Assessment of relationship changes in comparison to the situation before 1989

¹³ The situational assessment index was achieved: as follows: a certain number was matched to each variation of a sign (improved = +1, remained the same = 0, got worse = -1). The sum for each group of households oscillated between < -1; +1 >.

¹⁴ The question in the questionnaire was "How did the willingness of people to participate in the common activities change?"

¹⁵ In Sabinov, for instance, 64.0% consider these relationships stable though at the same time 60.4% stated the worsening of social participation.

It is one of the cooperation forms and as the multicultural phenomenon, it relates to nearly all areas of the common and festive life. Traditionally, it was offered on occasions connected with the common life on farms and in households, during family events and at unscheduled occasions, e.g. during the building of a house. Its characteristic is one of the primary principles of the relationship in local community – reciprocity¹⁶ (Škvovierová 1993). Mutual help was realised and is being realised nowadays in the variety of situations, which is confirmed in a few current sociological researches¹⁷. The need of help connects general lifestyle household situation and the type of surroundings, which it is involved in.

The interviewed households in each regional sample simultaneously declare that the need of help is required mainly in case of health problems (27–32%), financial problems (20–40%) and in bigger reconstructions and repairs (23–29%). After 1989, households in Topoľčany and Sabinov succeeded in being independent (without any help needed) mainly in bringing up children (57.5% and 66.5%), housework (57.0% and 58.4%), building activities (52.8% and 58.0%) and in the farm work (57.8% and 68.4%). In Senec, fewer households are successful in on-their-own (without help) performance¹⁸. The results of these households

indicate the need of help in the above-mentioned branches after 1989 and the help of specialists apart from the “traditional” sources of help (Figure 2).

Those who are asked for help the most frequently are parents in Senec (in 30.5% households are always asked for help, in 51.7% sometimes) and specialists, which is caused by better material and financial conditions in the responding households and better infrastructure of services. In Topoľčany with the already-mentioned higher average age of household members and generally in conditions of Slovakia quite old population, adult children are asked for help – always in 42.1% and sometimes in 31.5% of the interviewed households. In Sabinov the situation is more equal¹⁹. This signals the interesting combination of traditional and modern ways of help. The lower percentage of neighbour reciprocal help in comparison to other subjects is astounding, however, the balance (about one third of the responding households out of each region) of this feature points at its stability in the relation networks within rural surroundings. Local authorities are asked for help the least, only households of the Senec sample ask them for help (22.2%). Municipality autonomous authorities should play the most important role in the solution of local problems. The existing experience

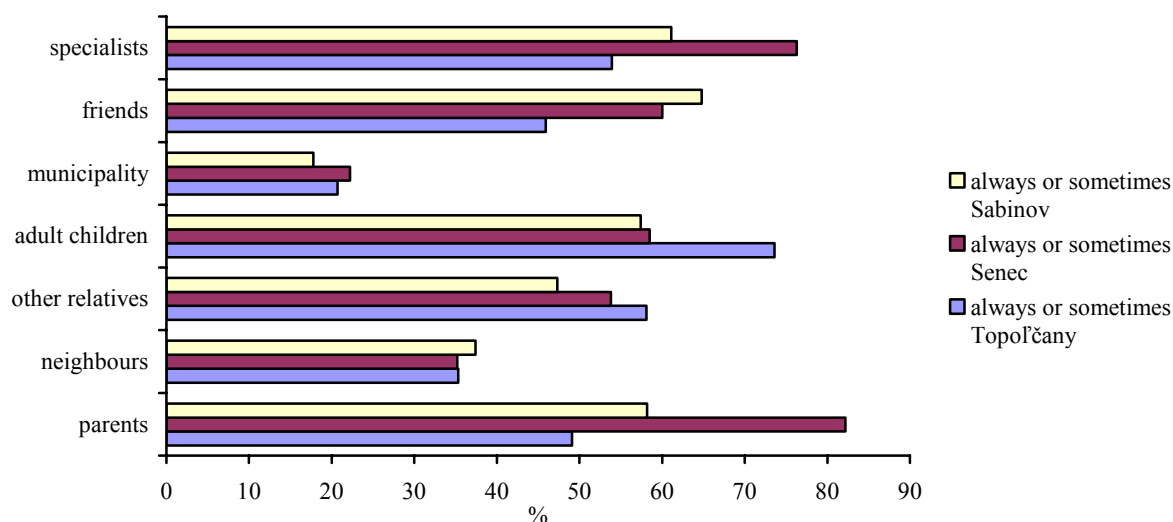


Figure 2. Those who are asked for help

¹⁶ Principle of reciprocity was consequently used in the past in the framework of the same social class, by partners of different community position respecting their property background, social status and adapted one another.

¹⁷ For instance, the research Family and Village in Central Europe collected the data which confirmed that about one third of 674 interviewed families from 12 villages in Slovakia were in need of some help (in period 1995–1996). A part of this research was published by Guráň et al. (1997).

¹⁸ 45.8% households in bringing up the kids, 36.1% in housework, 32.8% in building activities and 37.7% in farm work.

¹⁹ Friends are asked for help always or sometimes in 64.8%, specialists in 61.1%, parents in 58.2% and adult children in 57.4% of cases.

refers mainly to people's shortage, which would be respected by local leaders and would be initiated by the local government political parties, individuals and others community organizations, creating functional community partnerships, which would formulate the long run consensus about the basic conditions of village existence and expansion.

CONCLUSIONS

The legal actions after the revolution in 1989 had a significant impact on the individuals, families and their households. The countryside, as the environment with its own specific social structure, social organization and monetary system, has been badly affected by the community transformation.

Information collected in this research represents only a small part of the knowledge about the current Slovakia. It confirms the fact that Slovakia is really a differentiated country from the local and regional standpoint. Besides the "official" differences, there are variations in patterns which rule the real life in its particular branches and reflect people's opinions and attitudes, subsequently the models of behaviour, perception of certain situations and the choice of lifestyle strategies. Rural households members think that some branches of intra-family life and the life in the local society have more or less changed after 1989. The similar opinion prevails as far as the opportunities of asking for help are concerned. The structure of subjects, which stay in the position of help addressees, has also changed. The traditional ones remain, but new subjects appear according to the possibilities and character of the region. There is a distrust of people towards the municipality subjects in the Slovak countryside, which can be ascribed to the insufficient level of civic and social participation. It is difficult to say which group of rural households from the three selected districts in this case study has the highest adaptability, because the households characterized by more modern economic and civic behaviour lose their original demographical and socio-cultural features and vice versa. Also in accordance with the

concept of convergency and divergency of urban and rural areas (Moravčíková, Kučírková 2003, 2004) and with the empirical knowledge about the Slovak rural space and population, it appears that the optimal model of "transformational survival" is the combination of traditional and modern components in the life of rural families and local societies and the influence of the localization and position of the region.

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Contact address:

Mgr. Ing. Danuša Moravčíková, Ing. Martina Hanová, PhD., Slovenská poľnohospodárska univerzita v Nitre,
Trieda A. Hlinku 2, 949 76 Nitra, Slovenská republika
e-mail: danka.moravcikova@uniag.sk, martina.hanova@uniag.sk
