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Factors of Small Municipalities' Development – Case Study

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Anotation. The case study of three municipalities in Děčín region in North Bohemia analyzed the history and current state of these municipalities, the development of number of inhabitants, available facilities and other additional data. The goal of this study was to show that higher number of inhabitants must not be a decisive factor for development.

Key words: rural municipalities, countryside, rural development.

1 Introduction

As a part of the project of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MLSA), Socio-economical Development of Czech Countryside and Agriculture, a comparative study of two Czech regions has been carried out by the Sociological Laboratory in 2007. The goal of this study was to describe regional differences and to identify factors influencing the development of rural municipalities in selected regions. To obtain a more detailed picture of the situation, further analyses on local level have been carried out. The case study of three municipalities in the Ústecký region was one of them.¹ The three municipalities selected for this case study share similar geographical localization and historic development and, at the same time, differ in size (one of the goals of this study was to show that the size of a municipality does not have to play the main role in its development) and outer appearance. Although outer appearance and of a municipality is a purely subjective criterion, we have seen that the „first impression“ a municipality makes reflects how the life there is. Further analysis has corroborated this connection.

¹This article is based on the 11th Chapter of The Case Study of Selected Municipalities in township Děčín (author P. Mařiková), Czech Countryside 2007 – Study of South Bohemia and Ústecký Regions, FEM, CULS 2008, ISBN 978-80-213-1768-0.

2 Objective and methods

2.1 Characteristics of the analyzed region and common features of selected municipalities

Selected municipalities are located in the Ústecký region. According to the EUROSTAT methodology, this region belongs to mostly rural regions (as well as most of the regions in the Czech Republic). However, in comparison to other Czech regions, the Ústecký region is more urbanized and industrialized (with energy and mining industry). In the view of Czech regional politics, this region belongs among undeveloped and problematic regions.

Selected region in the context of CR:²

- with the area of 5 335 km² covers 7 % of the total area of CR, with the number of inhabitants 823 265 represents 8 % of Czech population – population density reaches 154,3 inhabitants/km² (average in CR is 130,4);
- 80 % inhabitants live in towns, this is 10 % more than Czech average;
- it is a „young“ region – average age 39,2 is one year lower than the Czech average;
- the unemployment rate (13,77 %) is double in comparison with the Czech average (7,67 %);
- secondary sector predominates over primary sector.

The unemployment rate in Děčín Township, where all three municipalities are located, is according to the Strategy of Regional Development high above average. The three municipalities are neighbors and are situated 25 km from the center of the township Děčín in a hilly area of the České středohoří (Czech Central mountain area).

The municipalities have common history – they were founded between 13th and 14th century as originally purely agricultural villages. During 18th century, deposits of black coal were found in their vicinity and first mines were opened. Thus the population structure and the way the inhabitants earn their living have changed. Machine building industry and textile manufactures developed here as well.

As a part of Sudets (Sudety, Sudetenland), this area was affected by the expulsion of German inhabitants after the World War II, who had predominated here after the colonization in 18th century. The number of inhabitants never grew back to the original number before the World War II.

All three municipalities with are classified as rural (less than 2 000 inhabitants and population density lower than 100 inhabitants/km²), one of them has, however, the status of a town.

²Source: Czech Statistical Office: Postavení kraje v České republice ve vybraných ukazatelích v roce 2006.

2.2 Characteristics of selected municipalities

Municipality A (Merboltice)

Merboltice is the smallest of the analyzed municipalities, with only 142 inhabitants in 2007. In the end of the 19th century, the population overreached 1000 inhabitants, most of them with German nationality. Merboltice has 150 houses. Permanent residents only live in 39 of them, the rest serve for recreation purposes. There are minimum facilities available – a pub and a library with internet access. There is no school or shop. The infrastructure is limited to water supply. Unemployment rate reaches 35 %.

Merboltice has a single cultural monument – a belfry, remainder of the church of St. Catherine, which was demolished in 1975. The municipality has taken over from the church in 2002 and reconstructed it. After the unsuccessful attempt to find original bells, which were transported to Germany during the World War II, a new bell was bought for the belfry for 130 thousand CZK collected among the inhabitants.

During a similar initiative, an outlook-tower was re-built on a nearby hill Strážný vrch. The tower was financed from a public collection and from grants from the Program of Rural Renewal in 2001 to 2006.

Money collections are not the only activities of local inhabitants. There are two clubs in the village, which regularly organize activities and contests for children as well as for seniors. Inhabitants voluntarily take part in renewal of the village.

Local representatives and the mayor of Merboltice show that they can get financial support not only for reconstructions and new buildings but more importantly for programs decreasing unemployment. Its decrease (unemployment rate reached 50 % only five years ago) proves that they are successful. The municipality also runs its own website.

The first impression the village makes on a visitor is positive – the streets and public places are clean, buildings reconstructed. These are also proofs of the activity of the municipality and its inhabitants and their interest in further development.

Municipality B (Valkeřice)

The second municipality has a little less than 400 inhabitants. Its geographical location is similar as of the municipality A. Most of its hundred houses are permanently inhabited and the municipality is divided in two parts. Valkeřice has better facilities – it has library, post office, kindergarten, two pubs and three small grocery stores. Unemployment rate is around 19 %.

The church was here, as well as in municipality A, demolished in 1975. Also this municipality has its outlook-tower. It is, however, in a desolate state and closed for public.

Local inhabitants meet at traditional events for children and adults as shown in photo-documentation and unofficial websites of the municipality run by a group of local youth. One NGO is active in the municipality. It organizes the reconstruction of a house for a foster family and plans to build up a community center.

Only little information is available about the activities of the local representatives and the mayor. They are, however, active and have been successful in acquiring grants for renewal of the municipality and employment support.

Municipality C (Verneřice)

Verneřice is the largest of the analyzed municipalities. It has 1 084 inhabitants and 322 houses in six village parts. 200 houses are permanently inhabited, the rest are weekend houses. The central part of the municipality is provided with infrastructure and facilities - there is an elementary school, kindergarten, post office, library, cinema and an office of a general practitioner. Unemployment reaches 17 %.

During its history, Verneřice itself (without other village parts) had more than 2 000 inhabitants and already in 1522 received the status of a town. The number of inhabitants decreased during the second half of the twentieth century to 750 inhabitants. In the 1970s, other village parts were connected to Verneřice in the framework of centralization (among them the former small town Rychnov) and the number of inhabitants grew to the current number. The municipality regained its status of a town in 2006.

There are not many initiatives of local inhabitants documented at the municipality websites. Every year, a wake of St. Anna takes place and a small music festival is organized by the municipality. The inhabitants have also organized a public collection. More than 50 thousand CZK was collected for a new drapery and a bell clap for the local church of St. Anna.

Although the central square in Verneřice is mentioned as an important town unit with Imperial style architecture, seems neglected. The concrete "cube" of a shopping center built in 1980's in the middle of the historic buildings and next to the Baroque church underlines the impression. Another church, the church of the Holly Trinity, which had been located on a nearby hill, was demolished in 1970s.

3 Results and discussion

The goal of this field study was to compare data characterizing each municipality, to find factors influencing development and to confirm or

disprove the hypothesis that the size of a municipality does not have to be the most important factor for its development.

Data on demographic development and the structure of population, facilities in the municipality and its accessibility, economic situation and participation in politics, etc. were collected. Some datasets were available in longer time frames (e.g. the number of inhabitants and houses since the year 1869, population mobility since 1991 and unemployment rate since 2002), some data was only available in relation to one date (population structure to 1. 3. 2001). Several dozens of indicators were selected from the available data according to different sectors (population, employment, living, quality of life, activity of citizens, activity of the municipality's authorities). To eliminate the possibility that the results would be skewed by the size of the municipality or the number of inhabitants, only relative (per person or per 100 inhabitants) or average numbers were taken into account.

Table 1. Comparison of Indicators of Development

Indicator	Unit	Period	A	B	C
Population structure and its development					
Relative increase/decrease	Change in %	↑ 1900-1950	31,81	42,06	31,28
Relative increase/decrease	Change in %	↑ 1950-1991	31,6	47,55	72,27
Relative increase/decrease	Change in %	↑ 1991-2007	146,39	107,32	100,93
Average age	Age	↓ 1.07	39,6	40,4	37,7
Vitality Index	Index	↑ 2006	117,5	108,4	153,6
Index of education structure	Index	↑ III.01	176,34	178,53	182,85
Employment and labour market					
Unemployment Rate	%	↓ VIII.07	23,21	17,7	12,35
Economical subject per 100 inhabitants	Number/100 inhabitants	↑ X.07	36	17	18
Trend of unemployment rate	Change in %	↓ IV.2002-VIII.2007	49,33	81,59	77,05
Activity of municipality					
Acquiring subsidies (average per inhabitant, 1999 - 2006)		↑ 1999-2006	2283,1	942,5	566,9

The data was filled into a balance table, where their direction of activity was identified (whether are higher values negative or positive for development). Indicators, by which it was not possible to clearly state their "direction", were excluded from the analysis (for example the percentage of agricultural land). We have further excluded factors, which showed equal values for all three municipalities (engagement in micro-regions and associations) and factors that are clearly size dependent (available facilities).

Following table shows selected results. The best results are filled in bold and the worst have grey background.

4 Conclusion

At the first sight it is obvious that none of the municipalities is “the best” or “the worst”, each of them is the best in some factors and the worst in others. We can see that the largest municipality – municipality C has the highest count of “first places”, so to say. Should the answer therefore be: Yes, the number of inhabitants plays the key role in development of the municipality?

At the second sight, we realize that the factors the municipality C is “good at” are: the lowest population decrease in the second half of the 20th century, the lowest average age and the greatest index of vitality and education, the lowest unemployment rate.

Many of these criteria, however, can have other causes. The municipality was in the second half of the 20th century selected as the central municipality. This step has influenced the development of population – the number of inhabitants did not decrease so drastically as in the others non-central municipalities, new apartment buildings were built here, services and facilities for citizens flourished and the job offer increased. The municipality was, and even today is, therefore more attractive for young people to settle in. This is the reason for the municipality’s better age and educational structure. The employment rate is higher thanks to the job offer in services and other enterprises.

On the other hand, the smallest of the three municipalities shows the best values in four indicators, which clearly show development as such. They show that the municipality has currently become attractive and therefore shows population increase caused by migration (greatest relative population increase in last 15 years), greater activity of its inhabitants (relatively greatest number of private entrepreneurs) and activity of local authorities (the municipality received the highest subsidies for support of employment policies and community services per person). The unemployment rate has significantly decreased in last 5 years – the most from all three municipalities.

These are the factors that truly indicate development and are most probably based in strong social capital. They are not merely preconditions for it as in municipality C. The relationship of social capital and development will, however, have to be confirmed by further research

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