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Local Initiatives Functioning as a Condition of Rural Development of the Czech Countryside

Abstract

Rural development is closely connected with the development possibilities of residential locations. Broken social ties are projected into its earlier development. The socialist way of life (from the end of the WW II until the end of the eighties) was ideologically formed by collectivist models. Social organisations were highly formalised and controlled from above. Thousands of new social organisations have emerged in the villages and in towns since 1989, mostly involving cultural, sports and social activities. Civil initiatives were slow in winning recognition in rural areas and some types of initiatives are still missing. A new impulse for their progress was the accession of the Czech Republic into the EU in 2004. Information is drawn from the sociological research projects of the Sociological Laboratory, Czech University of Life Sciences.

Keywords: Czech countryside, rural development, civil society, local initiatives

Introduction

The Czech countryside is characterised by markedly dispersed settlement. The Czech Republic currently has 10,230,060 inhabitants, living in 6,258 communes. Rural areas represent roughly $\frac{3}{4}$ of the territory, however, only 2,666,000 inhabitants (i.e. about $\frac{1}{4}$ of the population) live there. Rural communes are localities with under 2,000 inhabitants. In the Czech Republic, it is 5,634 (i.e. 90%) of all communes. An average rural commune has 473 inhabitants.

The decentralisation of rural settlement is given by the historical development. Rural areas are featured by a lower population density, worse infrastructure or the absence of infrastructure and worse possibilities of finding suitable jobs in comparison with urban settlements. Rural life depends on the basic material conditions of employment, the prevailing housing in farmhouses or family houses, and the ownership of a garden, an orchard and a plot with small farm animals.

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

Seeking just one key element which forms the quality of rural life is difficult. It is the result of many influencing factors and their constellation in time and space. Even seemingly very different rural areas can have almost consonant difficulties and vice versa. Very similar, adjoining villages develop in entirely different ways. These similarities and differences are not only specific to Czech areas. The European countryside is also distinguished by the diversity which was connected with the categories of development of the “rural” and “urban” space in the past. The growing “fuzziness” and changeover of both spaces which weaken the definition of the more obvious methodological determination of the quantitative (mainly economic) development indicators are accentuated at present. The influence and meaning of social indicators is more and more stressed (Labrianidis 2004, pp. 4–5).

The role of civil society grows in this context. The development of rural society is influenced by its particular institutions. Local initiatives will be the crucial elements of changing rural society (Majerová 2007).

Methodological Approach

There are many ways of investigating social changes in rural society. However, central statistic sources should be supported by field sociological research projects, which can be targeted on the relevant problems of rural development. Most rural population civil activities are so complex and cannot be described by hard statistic data. In human behaviour and activities there are various shifts in

time. That is why some findings of the Sociological laboratory research projects are used, which can show the life changes of the Czech rural population from different angles.

“Social changes of the Czech village” (1998)¹ focused on the topics of rural family and household, social changes after 1989, restitutions in agriculture, respected social values and future expectancy². The “Social trends in agriculture and countryside” project (1999) was broader. It investigated employment possibilities in the countryside, budgets of rural households, housing, plots, relations and neighbourhood, public facilities in the villages, political and social life³. The perception of Czech – Slovak relations after 1989 was explored in the “Czech and Slovak village” project (2002)⁴. It found that the development of both parts of Czechoslovakia was rather different before as well as after division. “Small entrepreneurship in the countryside” (2001)⁵ maps the conditions and presumptions of those members of the rural population, who started their own businesses after 1989. “Characteristics of rural villages” (2003)⁶ were related

¹ The year when the field research was performed.

² Sociální změny české vesnice (Social changes of the Czech village). Grant support of GAČR 403/98/1309. Investigation of three different Czech villages. Sample 300 persons (100 from every village). Used techniques: questionnaire, focus groups, interviews. Publication: *Tři české vesnice – srovnání*, [Three Czech villages – comparison], PEF ČZU, Praha 2001.

³ Sociální trendy v zemědělství a na venkově [Social trends in agriculture and countryside]. Grant support of the Czech Ministry of Education (MŠMT VS 97097). Sample 2142 persons older than 18 years from villages to 2000 inhabitants. Used technique: questionnaire. Publication: Majerová V. a kol.: *Český venkov 2000 – Základní údaje*, [Czech countryside 2000 – Basic information], PEF ČZU Praha 2001.

⁴ Česká a slovenská vesnice [Czech and Slovak village], grant support PEF ČZU. Sample 150 persons from one Czech and one Slovak village. Used technique: questionnaire. Publication: *Česká a slovenská vesnice v post-transformačním období* [Czech and Slovak village in post-transitional period]. Sociological Laboratory, Praha 2002.

⁵ Malé podnikání na venkově [Small entrepreneurship in the countryside], Grant support of Czech Ministry of Education (MSM 411100011). Sample 505 persons – entrepreneurs without employees and with max. 9 employees from South-Bohemian villages to 5000 inhabitants. Used technique: questionnaire. Publication: Majerová V. et al.: *Český venkov 2002 – Podniky a podnikání*, [Czech countryside 2002 – Enterprises and entrepreneurs], PEF ČZU Praha 2002.

⁶ Charakteristiky venkovských obcí [Characteristics of rural villages]. Grant support of Czech Ministry of Education (MSM 411100011). Sample 1324 majors of rural communes. Used technique: questionnaire. Publication: Majerová V. et al.: *Český venkov 2003 – Situace před vstupem do EU*, [Czech countryside 2003 – Situation before EU join], PEF ČZU Praha 2003.

to the development chances of villages. “Contemporary countryside” (2003)⁷ gave attention to the life style, housing, municipal government, local identity, population mobility. “Life of rural inhabitants” (2004)⁸ compared the living conditions of different age groups from the point of view of local identity, social activity and participation, living standards, values and inter-generational relations. “Life strategies” (2005–2006)⁹ described the types of nobilities and strategies, concerning work prospects, equal rights of men and women and life style. “Rural pictures” (2005)¹⁰ illustrated the perception of domicile and its meaning for residents. All these research projects had, to a certain degree, the indicia of local initiatives, which distinguish more and less dynamic rural social structures.

Historical Development

The basis and prerequisites of functioning local initiatives must be sought in the past. Czech rural society is shaped by complex factors, the influence of some of which persists from the past and we can indicate them as values of the traditional rural life style. Others are the distinct products of the present time.

⁷ Contemporary countryside. Grant support of the Czech Ministry of Education (MSM 411100011). Sample 1634 persons aged between 25–64. Used technique: questionnaire. Publication: Majerová V. et al.: *Český venkov 2003 – Situace před vstupem do EU*, [Czech countryside 2003 – Situation before EU join], PEF ČZU Praha 2003.

⁸ Life of rural inhabitants. Grant support of the Czech Ministry of Education (MSM 411100011). Sample 1 518 persons of communes to 2 000 inhabitants aged between 18–30 and 60–75. Used technique: questionnaire. Publication: Majerová V. et al.: *Český venkov 2004 – Život mladých a starých lidí*, [Czech countryside 2004 – Life of Youth and Seniors], PEF ČZU Praha 2005.

⁹ Life strategies. Grant support of the Czech Ministry of Social Sciences (MPSV 1J 016/04-DP2). Sample 2144 rural inhabitants working in and outside agricultur. Used technique: questionnaire. Publication: Majerová V. et al.: *Český venkov 2006 – Sociální mobilita a kvalita života venkovské populace*, [Czech countryside 2006 – Social mobility and quality of life of countryside inhabitants], PEF ČZU Praha 2007.

¹⁰ Rural pictures. Grant support of the Czech Ministry of Social Sciences (MPSV 1J 016/04-DP2). Sample 1591 rural inhabitants. Used technique: questionnaire. Publication: Majerová V. et al.: *Český venkov 2006 – Sociální mobilita a kvalita života venkovské populace*, [Czech countryside 2006 – Social mobility and quality of life of countryside inhabitants], PEF ČZU Praha 2007.

A very radical Land Reform which significantly changed the property and social conditions started in 1918, shortly after the birth of independent Czechoslovakia. The influence of gentry and landowners was restricted and the middle strata of the rural population were reinforced. The wide-spread system of co-operatives which played the role of economic protection and the functioning way of co-operation based on democratic principles played an important role. However, the existing ownership structure and the social differentiation of rural inhabitants strengthened the attractiveness of socialist and communist ideals.

The processes of nationalisation and collectivisation at the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s were the most important milestones influencing rural development. Their ideological background was the liquidation of private ownership and the creation of socialist agriculture on a large scale. The village was, step by step, forcibly industrialised and urbanised. Private farmers (as an economic force and social class) were totally eliminated. The meaning and role of civil society were replaced by the centralised system of state power and administration.

Rural Society in the Pre-transitional Period

With a certain simplification, we can state that rural society accepted the existing economic and social system before 1989 and that it lived its daily life in relative contentedness. During the 1970s and 1980s, indubitable progress was reached in agriculture and rural areas. People lived better than before, extensive building activities went on in villages, people's savings increased and household equipment was considerably improved.

Several historic periods of development created the political, economic and social framework, in which the opinions and attitudes of the population were manifested (more or less casually). However, the social and economic development proceeded in a different way in the two main sectors of agriculture (state and cooperative), among the different groups of enterprises as well as among the particular firms. The directive administrative system was modified by regional interference, especially by the different exploitation of local advantages, given by natural conditions, the infrastructure of territory or employment opportunities. In the second half of the 1980s, many questions emerged in Czechoslovak society, which would have been unthinkable some

ten years earlier. Empirical research was started independently to survey the actual, i.e. unfavourable state of affairs (Majerová et al. 1990).

The improvement of living conditions during the seventies and eighties had its limits, especially economic ones. The development of the socialist system had got over its zenith and its dissolution process had started. An attempt to stop it, called after the Soviet fashion *perestrojka*, was officially labelled *the economic mechanism reconstruction* in Czechoslovakia and was unsuccessful. The fear of the possible renewal of the 1968 *Prague Spring* tied the hands of those who should have been the driving force behind the economic changes. Besides, even moderate changes could have endangered most of the power positions, based on the leading role of the Communist Party, the uncontrollability, non-transparency and impunity of its steps, including the criminal acts. The unwillingness to any change was hidden by the terminology, which strove to link the inconsistency – the democratic role of the Communist Party, the development of an open and constructive dialogue to strengthen the political awareness of workers etc. The main newly fashioned terms were: effective intensification, motivation development, stimulation, initiative, involvement, optimal exploitation of the human potential, seeking reserves and the activation of the human factor. However, the end of the eighties allowed considerable freedom of opinion and critical voices could not be suppressed by repressive attempts (Majerová 1998).

Regarding economic factors, the most significant problems of agricultural enterprises were their administration and organisation. The enterprise management process showed, because of the limited possibilities of change and independent decision-making, the signs of degeneration. According to subjective statements an average manager of an agricultural enterprise appeared to the others as a...*person overloaded by the duplicate administrative activities, inadequately equipped with the technique (computers, printers, telephones, transmitters etc.) or utilising the equipment only partially, strictly subordinated to the central management and planning, with the absence of choice and independence in decision-making, losing his/her orientation in the tangle of directions, rules, recommendations and unclear competencies.* The most serious insufficiency, which stopped the natural development of business structures for almost 40 years, was the human resources and personnel policy. The logical relations between the work output and work remuneration were disrupted as well as the relations between knowledge, skills, work outputs and the possibility of an upward career (Majerová 1995, p. 90).

Social factors which influenced the growth of the population dissatisfaction were especially limited by the possibilities to apply own knowledge and skills, the undervaluation of education, wage-levelling, the remuneration of low-quality or sometimes even non-existent work performance, the benevolence towards the work discipline faults etc. The result was growing distrust among people, the devaluation of values in the field of education, intellectual activities and ethics.

Though discontent was very high, the possibility of other options was still missing. Rural society is shaped by the long-time mutual understanding between people, families and clans as well as strong social control. In contrast to the anonymous urban environment, manifestations of public discontent were practically non-existent here. There were no independent social organisations, which could influence public opinion and share decision-making in both the work environment and in social life (Majerová 1992, pp. 32–33).

To summarise, the state economic problems as well as the problems of enterprises increased, natural resources were gradually exhausted, the environment deteriorated, the extensive system of resource distribution was even more complicated, corruption, protectionism and nepotism expanded, health conditions of the population worsened, the moral views regarding attitude to work weakened.

Civil Society in the Transition Period¹¹

After 1989, the market economy model and open political system radically changed the position of the rural population. The most important impulses for change, which became evident in the areas of rural development after 1989, were the processes of privatisation, restitution and transformation of agriculture. This period was connected with the economic restructuring of the national economy and the renewal of civil life activities. Centralisation was replaced by decentralisation and regionalisation, state paternalism alternated by the stress on the responsibility of every person about his/her own destiny.

Choice became a new element of thinking. The hitherto existing pre-destination of long-term or life-long work position disappeared, as did many

¹¹ Some knowledge introduced in this paper resulted from the solution of research project of the Ministry of Local development WD-13-07-1 "Social capital as a factor influencing the regional disparities and regional development" (SOFARR).

limiting factors of centralised management and planning. At the same time, new problems appeared. The economy transition involved above all the reduction of the redundant work places as well as the radical increase of labour productivity and efficiency. The hitherto existing social advantages, such as supplied catering, financial contributions to children's as well as adult recreation, granted advantages for pensioners, special remunerations and gifts at personal anniversaries, social support, contributions to nursery schools budgets, the stabilisation and recruitment remunerations, top-ups of low old age pensions, interest-free loans for buying flats and household equipment, secured health care, education contributions, scholarships etc. could now only be offered by enterprises after the necessary financial and material resources had been created. Social demands and the economic possibilities often became contradictory.

Economic and social changes were reflected by the rural population on two levels – personal and public. On the one hand, all new possibilities were welcome; on the other, there existed fears of their consequences for personal life. Free elections, the end of the Communist Party's leading role, the end of Marxist-Leninist ideology, the end of the Communist nomenclature seizing all managerial posts, the possibility of expressing one's own opinion in public places, the renewal of religion and others were positively evaluated.

However, it is necessary to state that the ideas about the functioning and potential of civil society were very vague. The least positive evaluations appeared in relation to the manifestation of the political fight, state administration, the existence of many political parties and movements, the impact of the Civil Forum, the emergence of contradictory opinions and the activities of National Boards (Majerová et al. 1990, pp. 44–45).

On the personal level, greatest personal and family fears were connected with the growth of inflation, prices of goods and services, increased food prices, lowering of living standards, social disruption, rent increase, unfavourable living conditions for young families and the elderly, the threat of unemployment. The mechanism of civil co-operation did not yet exist; functioning institutions, clubs, information and experience were missing (Majerová et al. 1990, p. 49).

The Conditions and Background of the Civil Countryside Coexistence

The rural life style is determined by the possibilities of livelihood in the countryside. For centuries, it was connected with agriculture and supplementary activities. Employment in agriculture was gradually complemented and

replaced by jobs in other branches of the national economy. A significant share of the rural population commuted (on average about 60%) to bigger villages or towns. At the same time, the rural population sustained a certain material self-sufficiency: the family plot, the garden and the orchard did not represent only the resource of supplies but it also strengthened the close relation to nature, filled in the leisure time and created a kind of family and relatives' cooperation.

Relations inside the family and with relatives are the basis of rural social life (Pavlíková 2004). The type of contacts with other people and relations among village inhabitants depend on them. Similarly close relations are formed with the neighbours, people know each other for a long time and the neighbours become almost like relatives. This is created daily by mutual visiting, chatting, the exchange of opinions, information, help etc. The proximity of neighbours is a kind of social security. People are not only left to depend on the support and help of their family and relatives or the state and the local social system or the NGOs (Nežádal 1998).

Table 1. Forms of help to the elderly and frequency (in%)¹²

Forms of help to the elderly	Frequency			
	Daily, several times per week	1x per week, two weeks	1x per month	Several times per year
Chat, psychological support	42.9	37.0	11.1	6.2
Help in the household (cleaning, watering the flowers, etc.)	12.1	24.9	13.1	21.1
Occasional help in household (repair, window washing, decoration, etc.)	4.5	13.1	26.3	39.8
Help in the garden and plot (in season)	9.7	24.2	17.6	27.7
Shopping	10.4	21.5	23.6	17.4
Cooking	6.6	6.6	9.7	14.2
Transport to the doctor and administrative institutions	3.1	6.9	20.4	25.6
Help with administrative matters	2.4	3.5	11.1	30.4
Material help (garden-truck, etc.)	2.8	7.6	6.6	21.5
Financial support	0.7	1.0	2.8	7.3

Source: Srovnej Herová I. (2003), pp.139–146.

¹² Sample 1518 persons of communes to 2000 inhabitants aged between 18–30 and 60–75.

The family and relatives' help (especially from the younger to the older) consists of securing the common household chores, shopping for food and other household goods, help in the garden and the plot, maintaining the house connected with small repairs, window washing etc. If the situation demands, it also includes the transport of the elderly to the doctor, institutions and help with administrative tasks. The forms and frequency of this help are not only influenced by age. The predominant factors are whether the respondent is single or married, if he/she has a family and children, if he/she is employed or not and whether he/she lives with his/her parents or grandparents.

On the other hand, mutual contact also includes the help of the elderly to younger people. The most often used (even if not always appreciated by young people) activity is giving advice and experience in daily matters. Often it is also help in the household – common cleaning, cooking, and shopping. Great assets for young families are especially baby-sitting and help with the upbringing of children (grandchildren).

Table 2. Form of help to young people and frequency (in%)¹³

Forms of help to young people	Frequency			
	Daily, several times per week	1x per week, two weeks	1x per month	Several times per year
Advice, psychological support	25.5	31.0	14.7	21.2
Help in the household (cleaning, watering the flowers, etc.)	12.4	31.0	11.8	18.9
Occasional help in household (repair, window washing, decoration, etc.)	3.4	7.1	11.1	34.7
Cooking	20.9	15.0	9.7	17.1
Baby-sitting	14.4	18.8	11.6	8.4
Shopping	8.4	11.8	10.6	14.0
Help in the garden and plot (in season)	9.0	15.8	7.1	27.3
Material help (garden-truck, etc.)	9.6	17.3	14.2	31.6
Financial support	3.4	5.3	13.4	39.7

Source: Srovnej Herová I. (2003), pp. 139–146.

¹³ Sample 1518 persons of communes to 2000 inhabitants aged between 18–30 and 60–75.

If the elderly people's state of health allows, they take share in maintaining the house, small repairs, work on the plot and the garden. Besides financial help to young families, the elderly also try to ensure the maximum of self-supply to reduce the family costs.

The forms of help are influenced by the respondent's gender and age. Elderly people more often help young men with cooking and shopping, while young women with gardening and child care. The mutual help is evaluated positively by both the young and the elderly. The older generation grew up in different social conditions and cooperation in the family was a common rule. The younger generation sometimes perceives the material and financial help of the elderly as a common matter.

Most elderly people wish to stay independent of family help if their health allows for that. Intergenerational help is practiced mostly in the direct relation 'parents – children'. It is complemented by a wide range of state, local authority or NGO social services. For example, it includes shopping, cheap catering, services of an incoming nurse etc. Family cohesion is also illustrated by the prevailing opinion that older people should stay in the village, where they have lived and to which they are used and the help should be provided primarily by close relations, neighbours and only then by state institutions.

Relationships with relatives and neighbours (Maříková 2000, p. 11) are, especially in countryside, important factors in the creation of social networks, which form a set of mutually dependent relations among individuals (Hudečková and Lošťák 1995, p. 54). With them, there are closely connected feelings of cohesion and solidarity; they are also distinctive symbols of rural communes. Social life then emerges from the stability or non-stability of the social structure, which changed during history. After the WW2, several families often settled in the same village. They are identified with the neighbourhood at present.

Neighbourhood relations, in contrast to family relationships, which are defined by family ties, are featured by the existence of certain basic functions: 1. ceremonial (it confirms belonging to the neighbourly unit; a minimal manifestation of it is a greeting); 2. protection and help (basically informal and free of charge, unilateral as well as bilateral); 3. co-operation (mostly self-help); 4. general social intercourse (fellowship); 5. exchange of information; 6. social control (informal supervision over observing the norms of neighbourhood as well as general social behaviour); 7. socialisation (informal family education of children etc.) (Velký sociologický slovník 1996, p. 1189).

Attitude to a locality is also created by good neighbourly ties and almost 90% of the respondents indicate that they have at least one good neighbour in the village who they can rely on. 70% of them have several good neighbours. Solidarity and cohesion is higher in small villages and is rather expressed by those people who have lived there for a long time. A characteristic sign is the growth of cohesion in the case of threat, e.g. floods or other catastrophes.

Contrary to expectations, local patriotism is not very expressive in the countryside. Only about half of the respondents (45.8%) consider themselves as local patriots and are proud of their village. Another 13.3% have that feeling for another place to the one they live in at present. Others do not feel as patriots. Their reticence can be explained by the fact, that villagers have no strong need to demonstrate their own opinion in public. Their relationship to the village is expressed by the fact that they live in it and are interested in its development. Their relation towards the village is substantiated by statements: I am used to this place, I have my roots here, the village is quiet, the village has its own tradition, the village is developing, there are activities for the inhabitants etc. (Maříková 2003, pp. 191–196).

Czech rural society is markedly ethnically and religiously homogenous. Social exclusion (in the sense of exemption from society, neglecting social life, a negative relation to other social groups or individuals) occurs rarely. Social exclusion is most often linked to age categories (some pensioners hold back from others, some young people are not willing to participate in public matters, some young families only have an interest in their own affairs etc.). It need not present the evidence of social exclusion, but only of limited intergenerational contacts.

Social exclusion rather touches individuals than groups and results from their traits of character (solitary, taciturn and non-communicative people etc.), a different life-style (cottagers, people with specific interests and hobbies), and property relations (rich or poor people). Migrants, entrepreneurs, foreigners (different nationalities, races, ethnics, and religions) handicapped people; religious people, the unemployed, ex-convicts after returning from jail etc. are also mentioned among the excluded persons. In all cases, these are rather individuals or small groups of persons. There is no evidence of massive social exclusion (Maříková 2000, pp. 112–127).

Renewal of Civil Society

Civil society can be defined as an active involvement of citizens in public matters. All the above mentioned preconditions frame the cohesion and cooperation in the Czech rural areas. It is a simplification to say that there were no positive civil activities before 1989. We could find numbers of examples. However, the allowed social organisations were strongly formalised and controlled from above. During the eighties, so-called 'small islands of positive deviation' emerged spontaneously in the towns (i.e. civil organisations and initiatives which struggled for change of the political and social establishment). However, no such independent local initiatives appeared in rural areas, owing to the strong social control in small villages.

The beginning of the nineties was characterised by a significant growth of social organisations. Many of them were probably only a response to the period before 1989, when their activities were limited, and after a short time of existence they disappeared again. However, the elements of civil activities connected with the reform of public administration struggled step by step, above all strengthening of the bottom-up principle, partnership and co-operation in the framework of localities, micro-regions, regions as well as Euro-regions.

The reform of public administration started in 1990 and culminated by the cancellation of district authorities on January 1, 2003. The municipalities in the territory of the Czech Republic again obtained their lost autonomy. A significant part of decision making about public matters shifted more closely to local public administration and other public actors. The transition of competences from the centre helped to the rise of new local, democratically elected elites, it generally drew the local administration nearer to citizens and strengthened its legitimacy. On the other hand, the higher autonomy brought about many problems resulting from the limited dispensable economic, organisational and human sources of the territory for that purpose of implementation of more ambitious projects in the locality. That is why the voluntary coalition of municipalities was spontaneously created together with a break-up of municipalities into independent territorial units. The purpose is their co-operation in reaching common goals (see e.g. Vajdová, Čermák and Illner 2006).

Public administration is also open to co-operation, participation and partnership with other actors of local development, which are not only non-

profit organisations and the private sector but also the broad public (Nejdl and Čermák 2007, p. 13).

There are many interest coalitions of cities and municipalities in the Czech Republic. At present, the Ministry of Regional Development provides information about their existence and activities¹⁴.

From the sociological research projects, it results that the majority of municipalities (929 of the total examined number of 1135 municipalities) is engaged in unions or associations of municipalities. If we take a deeper look at their activities, the most frequent purpose and interest associations are such, the goal of which is building of the technical infrastructure (sewage system, gas services and dumping ground). Secondly, there are associations, which concentrated on the development of tourism (culture, sport), agrotourism and building-up of biking routes in the locality. Thirdly, the attention is directed to the economic development of the area (preparation of complex development programmes of the locality, micro-region, region etc.) (Maříková 2003, pp. 121–138). Local initiative is in this framework the driving force of economic and social changes in the rural areas.

Public Administration¹⁵

The precondition of co-operation among the individual actors is mutual confidence and information. It is based on the long-term personal knowledge of people in the rural areas. On the one hand, it is an advantage, but on the other hand, it can also mean stress. Political power conditions of the last decades formed the social structure according to the criteria of the Communist Party affiliation. The possibilities of education, professional career, economic yields as well as the position in the local hierarchy depended on this fact. The adversity of political representations after 1989 to name the negative effects of the Communist rule and to deal with the past is, of course, projected to the contemporary relations of local elites. The past as well as the present social relations and ties are more transparent in the non-anonymous environment of rural municipalities.

¹⁴ More information on www.mmr.cz

¹⁵ Pieces of knowledge introduced in this paper resulted from solution of an institutional research intention MSM 6046070906 „Economics of resources of Czech agriculture and their efficient use in the frame of multifunctional agri-food systems“.

From the sociological research projects, it results that the functioning of rural municipalities is significantly influenced by the activity of the local council. More than one third of the inhabitants know all members of the council personally, another third know the majority of them and 20% know some of its members personally. Only about 15% of the inhabitants do not know any of its members. Satisfaction with their work is connected with personal knowledge. It is evaluated positively by almost three quarters of the rural inhabitants (Majerová et al. 1999, p.125).

The rate of interest of the rural population in the activities of the municipality council depends on the level and way of communication of its representatives. If people do not have enough information, the space for the grapevine and suspicions is created, confidence and willingness fall. The size of the municipality has significant influence. With the increasing number of inhabitants, the knowledge of the council members and the information about their activities decrease. It is no longer concrete or current and becomes vague and anonymous.

Generally speaking, the interest about common matters grows with age and education. Young people only express a minimal interest in the functioning of their municipality, if it is not immediately connected with some of their hobbies (sport, enjoyment, culture). With the growing age and increased family worries, it shifts more frequent contacts (by enforced circumstances or voluntary ones) with the representatives of the local council. Parents of small children begin to perceive the locality as a background of their family and their willingness to take share in its development grows. The level of education also has its impact on the creation of views in village life. More educated people are more demanding in the evaluation of the quality of local life, but they are also more active in the assertion of new ideas (Pavlíková 2001, pp. 31–62).

Local Activities of Rural Inhabitants

The activities of the rural population are connected with the character of rural life. Prevailing housing in family houses and farmsteads, ownership of a garden and a plot, the natural environment, relationship and neighbourly ties – all of these create a framework in which specific interests and social activities can be implemented.

Commuting to work, shopping and official matters do not necessarily influence the social life of villages significantly. Even this can enrich the scale

of activities in the village. A more important prerequisite is the infrastructure of the communes, especially that which directly influences social activities of the inhabitants.

The extent of infrastructure differs according to the size of the commune. Typical infrastructure elements of villages up to 199 inhabitants are grocery stores and the second most frequent one is a public library. They are followed by pubs and restaurants. These are evidently the very few places where people can meet, because, due to the size of such communes, the other possible meeting place is the church (which is often limited strictly to religious ceremonies). Churches are found in less than a quarter of all Czech communes.

Small communes lack most of the mentioned facilities and their inhabitants must commute to bigger villages. The average distance of the individual infrastructure elements oscillates between 3.5 and 12 km. The closest are grocery stores and pubs. In the distance of 4–6 km, it is possible to find the majority of the other facilities (grammar school, kindergarten, public library, restaurant and the doctor's surgery). Social services, specialised shops, and a cinema are far more distant.

Communes up to 499 inhabitants have similar facilities, however, more frequently. Public libraries are in almost every commune of this size. The turning point of quality as well as quantity of the facilities is the size group from 500 to 999 inhabitants. The growth of facilities is visible, nevertheless, they do not reach the same level as in the communes over 1000 inhabitants. The apparent features of most of these communes are also pubs (with alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages and a limited choice of meals) and restaurants (with a broader choice of beverages, warm and cold meals).

Rural communes from 1000 to 2000 inhabitants have without doubt the highest level of facilities. People can reach most of the infrastructure facilities directly in the place of their domicile, but they also have the choice. There are more shops, services as well as cultural institutions. Almost all of them have a library, a cinema and a church¹⁶.

Social meetings, public and cultural activities, entertainment etc. are most frequently arranged in pubs or restaurants. About one third of the communes organises these activities in the town-hall and a similar number of communes has a cultural house. The other premises for meetings are in the fire station, the 'Sokol' (a wide-spread public sports organisation) house or in other suitable public places, i.e. in schools, libraries, in the parish hall or other church facility.

¹⁶ Ibid. Kapitola 11.3 Občanská vybavenost venkovských obcí.

More than half of rural communes hold social activities between four and eight times per year.

Social activities are relatively rich in the countryside. The most active and mass organisations are the voluntary firemen (81.7%), sportsmen (59.9%) and huntsmen (60.5%). The aims of the firemen and huntsmen's activities are obvious. Sports clubs include people actively interested in motoring, skiing, tourism, tennis, volleyball, biking, triathlon, bowling, darts, but also in less traditional sports like playing bridge, chess and whist. A considerable part of club activities is focused on growing plants and breeding animals, including floricultural and breeder activities (breeders of small farm animals, fruit-growers, gardeners, fishermen, beekeepers, dog-keepers and breeders).

Table 3. Membership in interest and social organisations (age groups) (in%)

	18–24	25–34	35–44	45–54	55–64	65 and more	Total
Red Cross	1.0	2.0	3.2	5.0	6.1	4.3	3.9
Voluntary firemen	8.0	7.6	4.9	10.7	8.1	6.0	7.5
Sokol (sports club)	8.0	5.1	5.4	3.1	3.2	3.5	4.6
Others	27.2	33.0	33.3	34.5	38.4	35.8	33.4
None	55.8	52.3	53.2	46.7	44.2	50.4	50.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Czech countryside 2000, sample 2142 persons.

A very traditional rural organisation is the Red Cross and the Women's Association (where logically mainly rural women are engaged). The cultural and educational activities are concentrated in clubs, like amateur theatre, singing choirs, folklore choirs, music groups, dance groups, brass music groups and various other cultural clubs. Sometimes it is difficult to disclose the activity of a club (e.g. the Union KLAN, the Union of the Independent BAB, the Kolping Family, the KLENOT, the Adorning Society, and the TRUANT Society etc.). Though there were not especially indicated ecological organisations, we can assume that the environmentalists and ecologists are also represented among the rural activities¹⁷. Generally we can say that the interest regarding club and society activities grows with the level of education and that it is differentiated (according to type and branch of activity) according to age. More passive

¹⁷ Ibid. Kapitola 11.7.2 Společenské a kulturní akce.

rural inhabitants are young people under 25, and people with secondary education.

Social life in the Czech countryside is not influenced by religion as significantly as in some other countries (i.e. in Austria, Germany, Slovakia and Poland). But there are also certain regions with a more intensive religious life (South Bohemia, South and North Moravia)¹⁸. The importance of religion changed considerably as a consequence of historical events. During the fifties, religion was strongly suppressed, religious education was abolished in schools, many churches and practically all monasteries were closed, religious orders abolished and priests were persecuted. When opposition against the totalitarian practices got stronger and there appeared the signs of democratic tendencies, religion became one of the means of protest against the regime for many people. Some priests shared their wishes for free meetings and reinforcing democratic and Christian values. Their sermons then belonged to much-frequented social events. Attending religious ceremonies represented the fellowship feeling of the citizens both at the end of the sixties as well as in the eighties. After 1989, the situation returned to its “normal” state and once again only the people, who perceive religion as an important spiritual value, attend the churches.

About 60% of the inhabitants state that they are believers (the prevailing religion being Roman Catholic, followed by the Czech Brethren and the Czechoslovak Hussite Church). The other churches register only small numbers of believers. Interest in religion rather increases with age, but does not significantly differ according to education.

In the rural areas, there were traditionally organised common activities for the village development and improvement in past and this trend continues also at present¹⁹. After 1989, there began, as in other economic and social activities, a significant differentiation. These activities are no longer obligatory or centrally managed (with the exception of the salvage of scrap metal and the communal transport of sorted rubbish, which needs an organisational cover of technique, transport means etc.). Public activities depend on the responsibility and activity of the mayor and the local administration, clubs, organisations and citizens²⁰. More than half of rural communes organise similar activities and they have a very positive impact as they integrate citizens to the common work and bring about not only social but also material assets which are useful

¹⁸ Ibid. Kapitola 15.6 Náboženské vyznání.

¹⁹ Before 1989 so called action „Z“ or public brigade.

²⁰ Ibid. Kapitola 11.7.3 Akce pro zvelebení obce.

for the village. Most frequently these activities are focused on cleaning (spring, autumn or cleaning of the public space regardless of season). Further it is cleaning and repairs of public playgrounds, swimming-pools, churches, village greens, ponds, maintenance of public paths, pavements etc. Local inhabitants also take care of public greenery, plant trees and work in the woods.

Communes, on the other hand, only rarely carry out (by citizen self-help) building repairs and reconstruction. The reason is probably their high technological and cost demands, which is why specialised firms are usually used.

A higher level of civil activity is manifested in smaller villages. The larger the size of a community, the lower the interest of its citizens²¹. The explanation lies in two facts – there are more frequent and more personal contacts between inhabitants of smaller communes, they feel a higher responsibility for the environment they live in and social control is higher. Larger communes more often use paid employees for cleaning and maintaining. Therefore, civil activities are limited and social control is lower, because sometimes the inhabitants do not even know each other.

Future of Local Initiatives

Results of sociological research projects acknowledge that it is always possible in the Czech countryside to find elements characteristic of traditional rural society. It is above all the developed network of relationships and neighbourly ties, the cohesion of inhabitants and willingness to help each other. Neighbourhood in a small village has greater significance, because the whole village can create a neighbourly group.

We can see the future of local initiatives on two levels: the personal (family, relatives, neighbours) and the public. Both levels blend together and influence each other.

The social life of rural communes depends on both objective and subjective factors. Among the objective prerequisites of its development, we can include the demographical structure of the population (the number of permanent inhabitants, weekend inhabitants, temporarily settled inhabitants, visitors and

²¹ From villages of up to 199 inhabitants are activities of local people in 73.9% communes, in size 500–999 inhabitants in 49.7% communes, in size 1000–1499 inhabitants in 40.4% communes and in size 1500–2000 inhabitants in 41.7% communes.

those who work in the village yet live elsewhere). These factors are closely connected to whether the inhabitants consider their commune as a mutual meeting place, where friendly relations are sustained, where social and sport activities are organised. On the other hand, the village can be a place where they are permanently settled but spend a minimum amount of time there, because they work, shop, amuse themselves and relax elsewhere. Among the objective prerequisites, we can further include the facilities of communes, which either support social life by providing sufficient and suitable facilities for meeting and the development of common activities or the social life is, on the other hand, rather limited, because there are inadequate material conditions for it.

Subjective factors are closely connected with the historical development of the village and the social structure of its inhabitants. In regions where a massive movement of the population (depopulation, resettlement and migration) occurs, as a rule ties among the people are severed while new relations are created more or less successfully. The older inhabitants and witnesses can play a stabilising role in society; they can be the bearers of tradition and the initiators of its sustenance and renewal. The balanced share of other age groups (middle and younger) is just as important. The education level of the population is also an important feature. More educated people represent an asset not only for the community management (participation in local government, bodies

Table 4. Conception of countryside (in%)

What links me with the countryside...	1st order %	2nd order %	3rd order %	4th order %	5th order %
1. Ecology	5.0	2.8	3.2	5.0	6.3
2. Roots, tradition, history, childhood	20.7	7.5	8.0	8.2	8.0
3. Free landscape, free space	14.9	17.2	12.5	13.2	11.2
4. Physical, manual work	4.4	9.9	11.3	11.0	8.9
5. Recreation	4.2	8.0	8.9	8.6	7.5
6. Poverty, backwardness	1.3	2.6	2.8	3.2	2.9
7. Cottage	7.8	10.8	14.8	10.7	9.6
8. Agriculture	21.0	16.1	13.0	13.2	9.3
9. Leisure time	0.8	4.7	4.9	4.9	6.8
10. Nature	16.0	15.5	13.8	14.6	16.2
11. Subsistence farming, gadgetry	3.6	4.8	6.7	7.3	13.0
12. Others	0.3	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.3

Source: Czech countryside 2006, sample 1591 rural inhabitants.

and organisations) but also for its economic functioning (the development of entrepreneurship, the preparation and participation in the development plans of the community) and social functioning (participation in social organisations, share in the publicly beneficial activities).

A functioning municipality provides a good background for the personal and family life of individuals and they, on the other hand, are responsible for the common life in the village. The traditional rituals of social life are reflected in the habits (common celebration of feast days) and support the feeling of solidarity, identification with the development goals of the commune, the willingness to participate in public life, bringing their own ideas and helping other inhabitants. Good neighbourly relations stem from good family relations as well as from the good quality of relations within the municipality.

Table 5. Influence on the countryside (in%)

Positive and negative factors of rural development	Positive in%	Negative in%	Half and half in%
Agriculture	75.4	5.5	19.2
Tourism	40.4	27.9	31.7
Nature conservation	83.2	4.9	11.8
Close interpersonal relations	64.2	9.0	26.8
Industry	6.6	76.3	17.1
Development of small entrepreneurship	60.3	13.1	26.5
Building of new housing on the outskirts	40.8	29.6	29.5
Ecological agriculture	86.4	4.0	9.5
Church	48.8	11.2	40.0
Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Local Affairs	38.9	20.6	40.5
Space, distance	44.7	28.8	26.5
Modern technology	40.9	27.4	31.7
EU, state, region	26.2	24.4	49.4

Source: Czech countryside 2006, sample 1591 rural inhabitants.

The accession of the Czech Republic to the EU also means the extension of the possibilities to develop rural areas with the support of EU Structural Funds. However, the character of rural life is created especially at the personal level. It is probable that strengthening of local activities and making use of local ideas and sources can be in the long term more successful and will lead to sustainable development more reliably than any external intervention. The prerequisite is a social environment which can sustain correct relations of the fruitful co-operation among all actors at all levels.

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