

Social changes and standard of living of the population in rural areas in Poland in the second decade of the 21st century as an important area of smart specialisation

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Abstract

Rural areas in Poland occupy 90.3% of the country. Over 15 million people (nearly 40% of the population of Poland) live in the villages. The accession to the EU has a significant effect on socio-economic situation of rural dwellers. The level of schooling and educational activity changed significantly as well as the life-expectancy of the elderlies increased. In the past two decades the changes in lifestyles were accompanied by the development of information and communications technologies. The contribution of agricultural sector, which employs only a certain number of people, to the rural economy reduced. Above mentioned factors are important for social change in the Polish countryside.

The purpose of the article is to analyse social changes in rural areas in Poland in the second decade of the 21st century and their impact on the standard of quality of rural population. It will discuss the issues related to demographic conditions, economic and educational activity of rural population. The analysis will cover also changes in social activity of inhabitants of rural areas after Poland's accession to the EU, including e.g. participation in elections, authorities in rural areas or a degree of trust to the selected institutions and persons. Basic research material encompasses the data of mass statistics and data obtained from surveys of IERiGŻ-PIB, covering the years 2000–2005 and 2005–2011 on the basis of which trends and directions of social changes will be defined¹.

Keywords: rural areas, social activity, standard of living, smart specialisation, Poland

Социалните промени и жизненият стандарт на населението в селските райони на Полша през второто десетилетие на 21 век като важна област на интелигентна специализация

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Резюме

Селските райони на Полша заемат 90,3% от страната. Над 15 милиона души (около 40% от

населението на Полша) живеят в селата. Присъединяването към ЕС има значително влияние върху социално-икономическата ситуация на селските жители. Нивото на образователна активност се е променило много, а продължителността на живота на възрастните жители се е повишила. През изминалите две десетилетия промените в начина на живот са съпътствани от развитието на информационни и комуникационни технологии. Приносът на селскостопанския сектор, осигуряващ работа за ограничен брой хора, към икономиката е намалял. Изброените фактори са важни за социалните промени в полските провинции.

Целта на статията е да анализира социалните промени в селските райони на Полша през второто десетилетие на 21 век и тяхното влияние върху стандарта на живот на селското население. Разискват се резултатите по отношение на демографските условия, икономическата и образователна дейност на селското население. Анализът обхваща също промените в социалната активност на жителите от селските райони на Полша след присъединяването към ЕС, включително участието в избори, управленската власт в селските райони или степента на доверие към избраните институции и личности. Базовият материал за изследването включва данни от масовата статистика и данни от изследвания на IERiGŻ-PIB през периодите 2000–2005 г. и 2005–2011 г., на базата на които са дефинирани тенденциите и насоките на социалните промени.

Ключови думи: селски райони, социална дейност, жизнен стандарт, интелигентна специализация, Полша

INTRODUCTION

Smart specialisation is defined as a new or evolving economic specialisation, which bases its competitiveness and development on specific and unique regional resources, novel approach to their application and innovativeness. Selection of the areas of potential specialisation in particular regions finds its justification also in the field of agriculture and rural development as it addresses the need of taking into account changing economic and social conditions. Bearing in mind climate changes and declining resources, all the EU countries need to radically change their approach to production, consumption, storage and recycling of biological resources. Therefore, an important challenge for the contemporary society is to reasonably manage resources, specify the potential of development and involve themselves in issues related to the local environment. Such actions have an impact also on the improvement on the standard of living in rural areas, including the growth in employment.

In the context of smart specialisations, an important resource (potential) of rural areas in

Poland are social capital and institutions. Today, more and more importance is attached to socio-cultural phenomena as economic growth factors, e.g. the concepts by Porter, Skot and Storper who treat institutional, legal and sociological conditions in categories of non-economic resources which could determine the development or regression in the region (Grosse, 2002; Jasińska-Kania et al., 2006). The institutionalism theorists approach the economic development in a similar manner: the formal activities and legal rules of the economic life are always anchored in the social environment. The commonly shared values and cultural practices shape the world of economic organisations. Douglas North – a representative of the modern trend of institutionalism, winner of the Nobel Prize in economics – treats institutions as the game rules, which limit the activities of an individual. In North's opinion, institutions are restrictions made up by people and structuring human relationships (Grosse, 2002). In simple terms, we may then conclude that the more active are the residents, the more they support the development process of the regions.

Selected directions of social transformations in Polish rural areas

An improvement of the structure of agricultural farms, growing landless population as well as demographic changes in rural areas in Poland taking place in the second half of the 21st century have impact on many changes in the social environment of rural areas. Structural transformations in Polish agriculture, including improvement in the agrarian structure of holdings and the fact that agriculture does not provide a sufficient number of jobs, affect not only changes in the directions of activities of individual holdings and the outflow of the employed to non-agricultural sectors (Zegar, 2009; Chmielewska, 2013), but also translate into a series of changes and social problems. Processes of concentration in the agricultural sector, phenomena of migration and accessibility to the urban labour market affect the scale of changes both in the rural settlement network and the connection of the rural population with agricultural holdings (Sikorska, 2013). Technological progress in agriculture, change in the nature of Polish holdings and increase in the diversification of the professional activity of the agricultural population contributed to a significant decline in agricultural employment.

In the years 2005–2011, the population of the surveyed villages decreased by about 6%. This resulted from, first of all, a clear decrease in the population from the farming families (Karwat-Woźniak and Sikorska, 2013). In the rural population, the percentage of the families not connected with agricultural holdings (landless population)

for many years has been increasing systematically (Fig. 1.).

In 2011, the number of the landless rural families accounted for more than 60% of the total surveyed families and in relation to the year 2005 it increased by 3 percentage points (p.p.). When compared to the period from before the political transformation, this share has increased significantly, by as much as 20 percentage points. The basic mechanisms of this process was the departure of the rural population from agricultural activities and its professional activation in other branches of the economy or ceasing production activities due to reaching retirement age.

Another important process is the problem of the ageing of the rural population. The population aged 70 and more is significantly growing, including persons from the oldest age group, above 80 years. In particular, this applies to a group of rural women. According to the CSO data, in 2014, rural areas were inhabited by nearly 1.5 million persons aged 70 and more and persons above 80 accounted for nearly 600 thousand. Therefore, there is a need not to only provide care, especially to the lonely and sick, but also to take measures to include a relatively large group of the elderly into the social life of the countryside and thus to make use of their potential (Wrzochalska, 2015).

As in the cities, the process of improving the level of education has become evident in rural areas. Especially rural women have ambitions to pursue educational goals. Rural population raise their qualifications also on various types of courses (agricultural, off-agricultural and specialised). It can be said that the agriculture being the ship

¹ Research material includes results of the IAFE-NRI surveys, based on a sample of over 8 thousand rural families, of which in 2011 approx. 40% owned agricultural holdings with over 1 ha of agricultural land. Each time, all families residing in 76 selected villages were surveyed. The sampling was purposeful and took account of socio-economic features and the agrarian structure of agricultural holdings situated within the selected regions. The scope of the information collected was extensive and concerned numerous aspects of life of the rural population and the functioning of agricultural holdings. These surveys are used mainly to analyse the transformations in the agrarian structure and determine the socio-economic conditions in agricultural production. Apart from the data being source material for the above-mentioned issues, the survey also provides much information describing the local community formed by the rural residents. The latest edition of the survey was carried out in 2011, but the discussed matters are focused on the directions of transformations and on the trends, and those have remained unchanged in the recent years (in those areas to which the analysed matters refer).

graveyard for the persons with wrecked education or those who do not have opportunities of changing their professional activity is already a thing of the past. It should be stressed that the relatively more positive changes in this area have been recorded in the community of the farming families (Table 1), and in the group of rural women (Table 2).

We may think that the convention under which persons staying in agriculture are those with the lower level of education or those who have no chance to change their professional activity has been overcome. In particular, the percentage of persons with the higher and secondary level of education has increased. Rural women have

particular ambition in striving for achieving educational success.

From the surveys it results that the percentage of women with higher education is almost twice higher than that of men. The rural population improves their qualifications during various courses. Almost every fifth village organised agricultural and non-agricultural training courses and every tenth village – specialised courses (Dudek and Wrzochalska, 2015). However, in rural areas there are limited non-agricultural employment opportunities, especially for persons with higher education, in particular, rural women have relatively little chance.

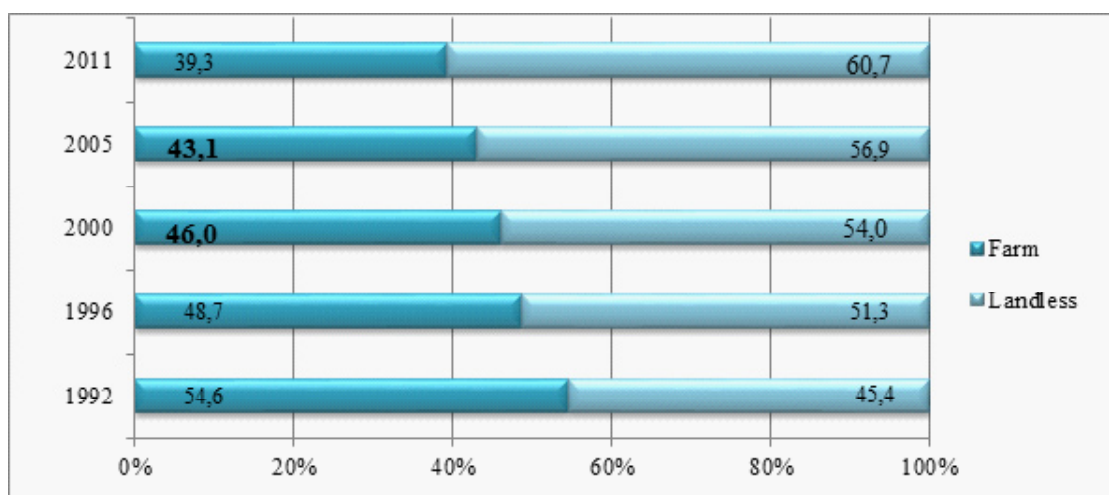


Fig. 1. Changes in the percentage of the farming and landless families in Polish rural areas
Source: IAFE-NRI surveys 1992–2011.

Table 1. Level of education of the population in the farming and landless families

Years	Higher	Secondary and post-secondary	Vocational	Lower secondary and primary
Landless population				
2000	3.6	18.1	38.8	39.5
2005	5.3	22.5	36.1	36.1
2011	11.1	29.1	33.1	26.8
Farming population				
2000	2.1	17.0	39.2	41.7
2005	5.0	23.2	37.4	34.4
2011	12.3	32.1	30.7	24.9

Source: IAFE-NRI surveys, 2000–2011

Table 2. Level of education of the population in rural areas, by gender

Higher – master’s degree	Higher – bachelor’s degree	Secondary and post-secondary	Vocational	Lower secondary and primary
Men				
5.2	3.9	28.3	38.0	24.7
Women				
8.2	5.3	32.9	24.7	30.7

Source: IAFE-NRI surveys, 2000–2011.

Employment in agriculture in one’s own agricultural farm does not provide working conditions for all the interested. Notwithstanding the gender, nearly two-thirds of farm managers works only on their own farms. Therefore, contemporary rural women in Poland invest in their ambitions and work outside the farms. Thus we can speak of the process of unification of attitudes of rural men and women.

Standard of living in rural areas

Changes in professional attitudes, especially between persons employed in agriculture and landless persons, are also reflected in their opinions about the standard of living in rural areas. A percentage of persons willing to say that their standard of living has improved since 2005 is larger in the case of persons from farming families.

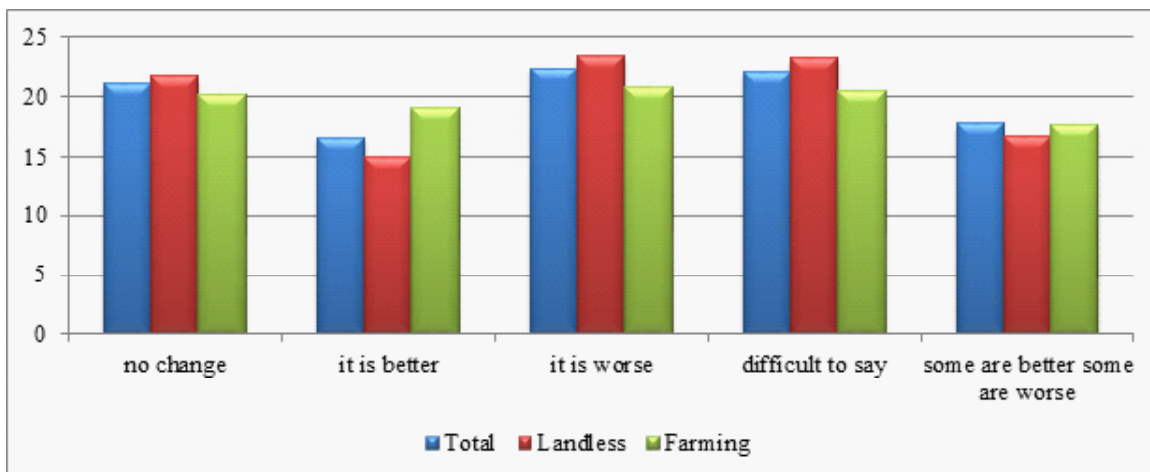


Fig. 2. Changes in the living standard in rural areas when compared to 2005 – percentage of opinions of the rural residents

Some are better: Some are worse

- *Improvement in the financial situation *Deterioration of the financial situation
- *Improvement in technical infrastructure *Lack of a job, unemployment
- *Improvement in the living conditions
- *Modernisation of holdings

Source: IAFE-NRI surveys, 2011.

Among all people living in rural areas, the positive changes were noticed by 13.5% of them. The members of the farming families were more optimistic than the members of the landless families. Almost one-fourth of those persons (who noticed that it is better) thought that their financial situation improved, they have a job, they modernised or increased the scale of agricultural production. Nearly every fifth person from the group of the satisfied also noticed the improvement in the level of technical infrastructure in rural areas (e.g. building of a water supply and gas pipeline, of a bus stop). The less numerous group also noticed the positive changes regarding the supply or pointed to the possibilities of modernising or upgrading the holding, which significantly improved the conditions of work in agriculture.

The relatively large percentage of the persons did not notice any changes or was unable to clearly identify their situation in relation to the issues related to their living standard in rural areas. Almost every fifth rural resident decided that their living standard had become worse. Most of those persons (nearly two thirds) stressed that their financial situation had deteriorated (their income decreased, the profitability of agricultural production deteriorated, there were problems with the sale or contracting).

There were also signals regarding an impossibility of finding a job and unemployment present in the countryside. The deterioration of the situation in rural areas in the recent years was indicated more often by the persons not associated with agriculture. Therefore, the situation where it was the landless population who had the better living conditions in the countryside has been reversed. Thus we may observe a reversal of a situation observed in the past when it was a non-farming population which enjoyed better standard of living in rural areas and adopted in the country urban models of life.

More than half of the total population of the surveyed villages (54.4%) rated positively furnishing of their houses; a little over a third considered

it average and only less than every fifteenth considered it bad. This rating was relatively better in case of the farming families (Fig. 3).

In total, when compared to 2005, there was an increase in the percentage of the families which rated positively their furnishing with durable goods (Fig. 4.). The farming families rated better their furnishings better than the landless population. In the past, it was the landless population which adopted the urban patterns in the countryside, now the situation changes.

The major deficiencies in households and a specific difficulty in the work related to the household were indicated in nearly half (48.5%) of the surveyed families. Those deficiencies related mainly to technical infrastructure – no sewage system in case of 11.6% of the families, the absence of central heating and bathrooms was reported less often (less than every twentieth family reported such difficulty). In the household, the work was made most difficult by the lack of a dishwasher (11.6% of the responses). In nearly every twentieth family, the lack of a washing machine made its functioning difficult.

The ability to use information has become a prerequisite for the economic and cultural development. In addition, access to these modern information media eliminates a lot of difficulties and limitations related to the distance and spatial dispersion (Kowalski, 1998). A factor diversifying the village in relation to cities is having access to a computer and to the Internet. However, it should be emphasised that this situation had clearly improved in rural areas in recent years, and farming population more often than the landless one uses a computer and the Internet in their professional activities. Farmers treat this device in a more professional manner (Fig. 5.). The use of the Internet in professional activities by the farmers is reflected in benefits and effects of their production.

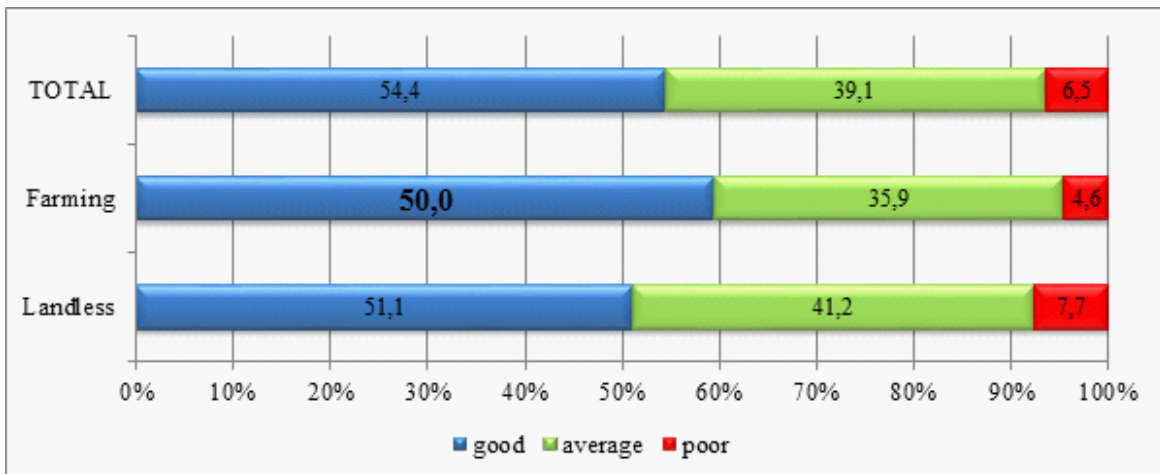


Fig. 3. Furnishing of households as rated by the residents of the surveyed villages in 2011
 Source: Based on the IAFE-NRI Survey, 2011

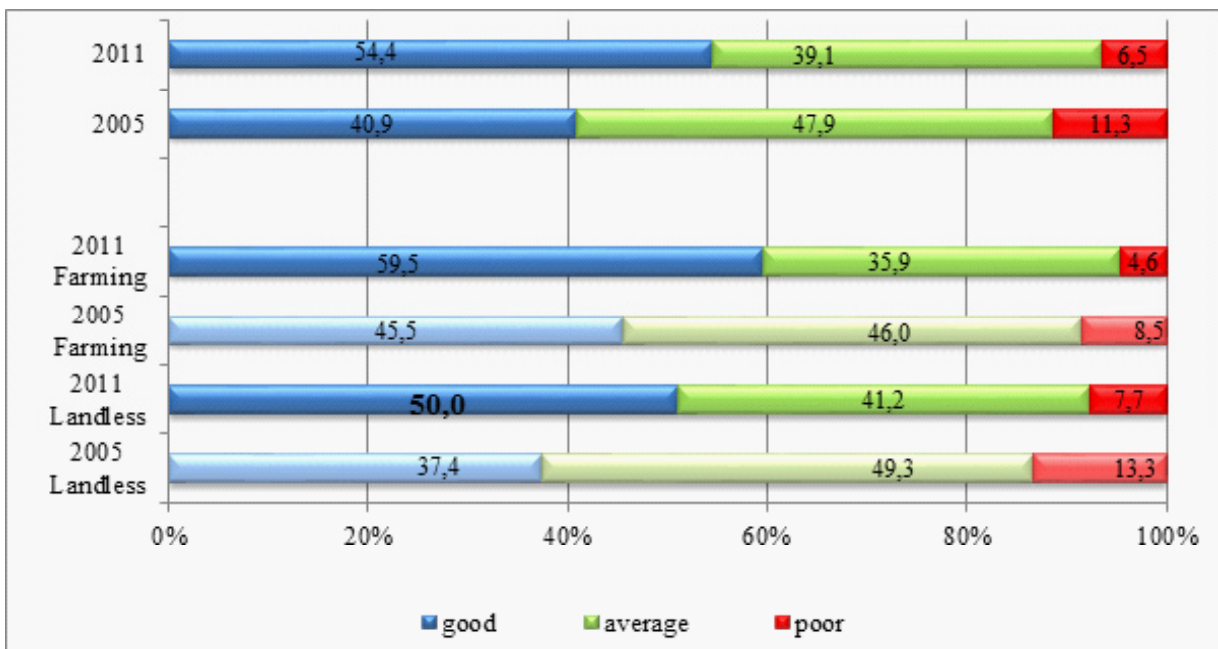


Fig. 4. Furnishing of households with durable goods – as rated by the rural residents
 Source: IAFE-NRI surveys, 2005, 2011.

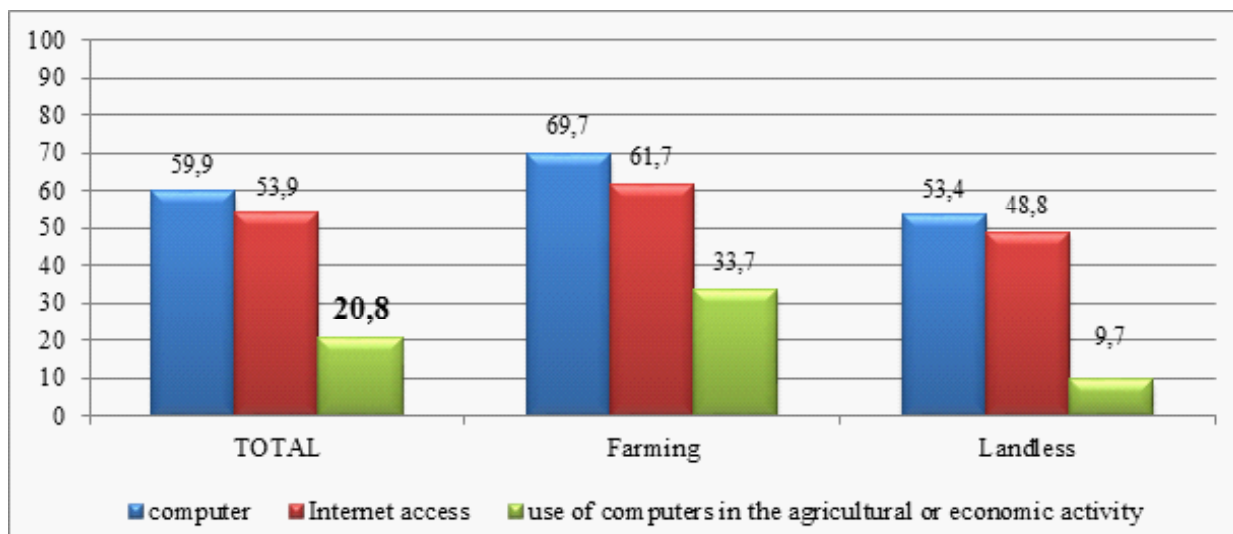


Fig. 5. Computers, Internet access and use of computers in the countryside in 2011
 Source: Based on the IAFE-NRI Survey, 2011.

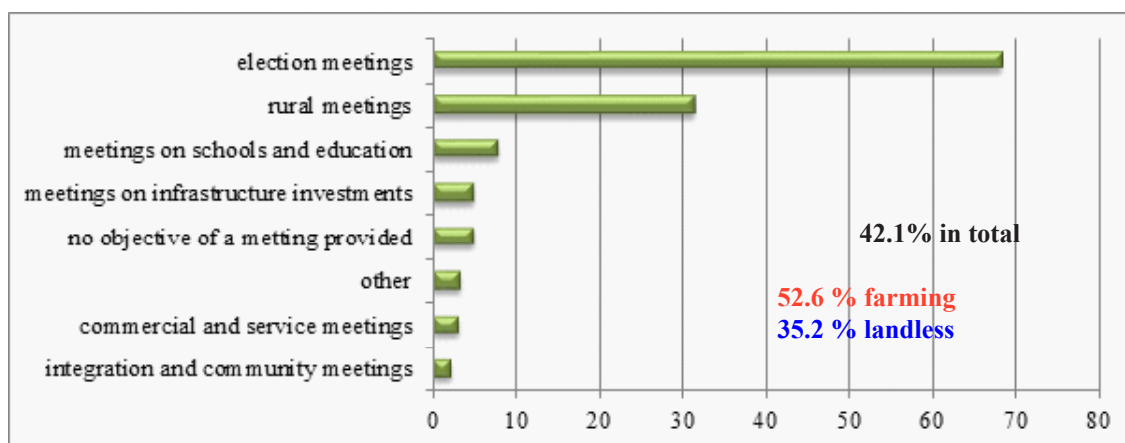


Fig. 6. Participation of the rural population in public meetings (percentage of rural families)
 Source: IAFE-NRI surveys, 2011.

In 2011, more than two-thirds of the farming families had a computer while in the landless families – more than half. The surveys also show that the farming population, more often than the landless population, uses computers and the Internet for the purposes of professional activities. In every third farming family, a computer and access to the Internet were used to pursue the economics of agricultural activity and among the landless families that value was lower. In this case, just every eleventh family used a computer and the Internet for the economic activity, mainly to contact customers. The farming families relatively often logged onto the websites of the MARD and ARMA, in addition, half of the families logged onto the websites of the AMA, slightly less often onto the websites of the APA, ASIF and agricultural portals, and only almost every tenth landless family visited those websites.

Involvement of the population in the social life of the countryside

From the surveys carried out it results that in the recent years the social activity of the rural residents has increased, understood as participation and involvement of the population in the social life of the countryside (Wrzochalska, 2015). Relatively low participation among socially active persons was observed in case of young people, and women with higher education, which is a consequence of demographic changes (ageing of the society, migration of young people).

The population from the farming families is more involved and active than the population from the landless families in the matters relating to the rural community. What should be stressed is this stratification and specific isolation of the landless population, which is less involved in the matters of the immediate environment.

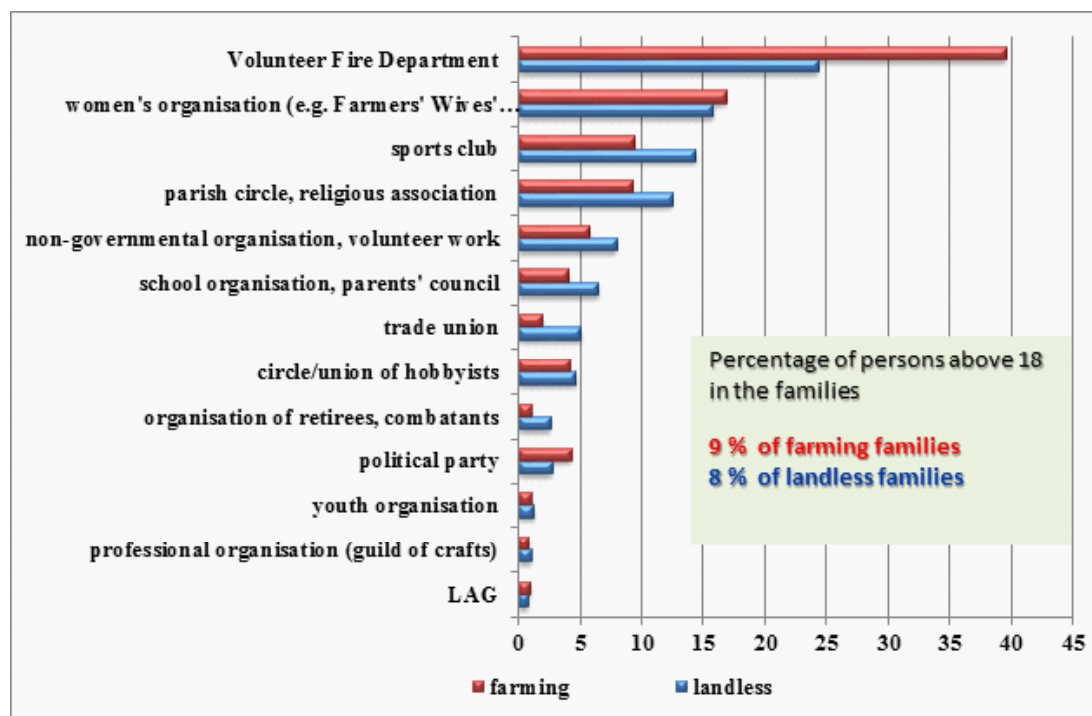


Fig. 7. Members of organisations, associations, parties, committees, religious groups, unions, circles in rural areas

Source: IAFE-NRI surveys, 2011.

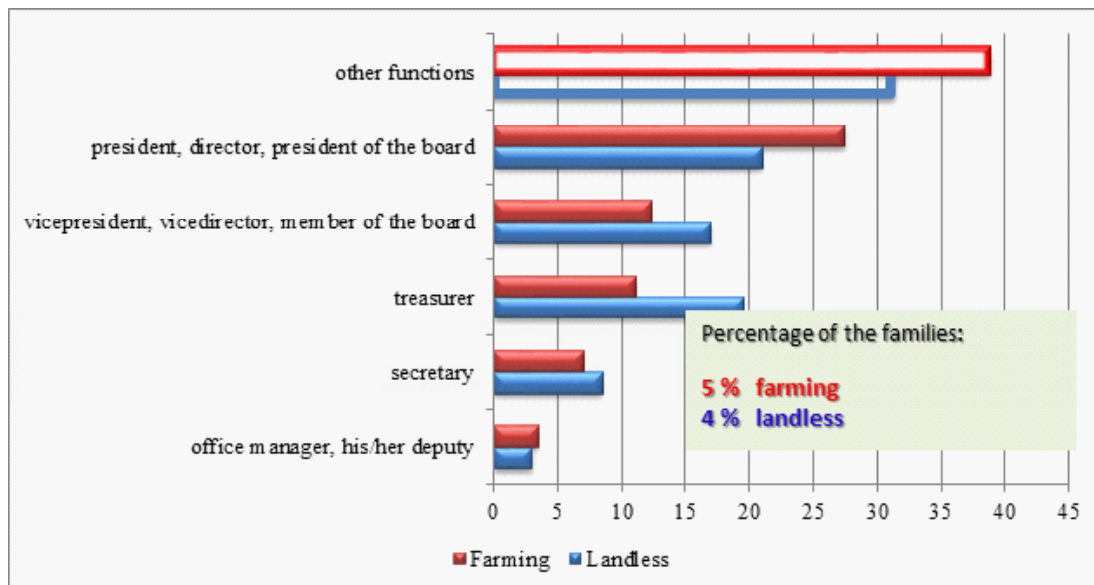


Fig. 8. Functions performed in organisations
 Source: IAFE-NRI surveys, 2011.

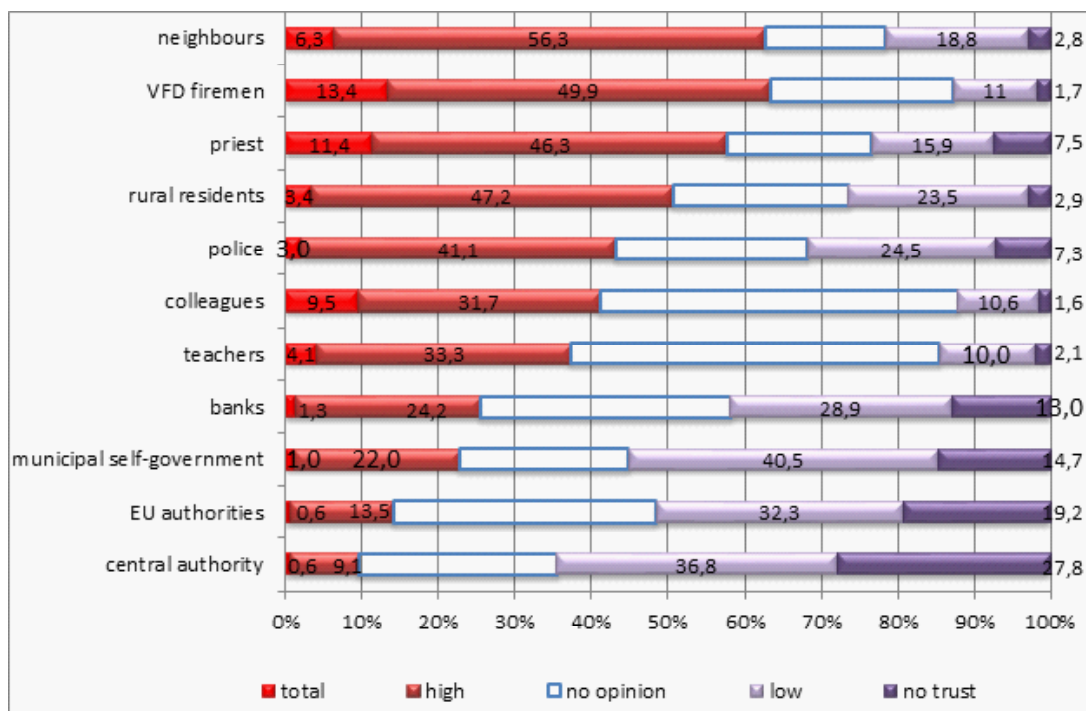


Fig. 9. Level of trust of holding managers (percentage of responses)
 Source: IAFE-NRI surveys, 2011.

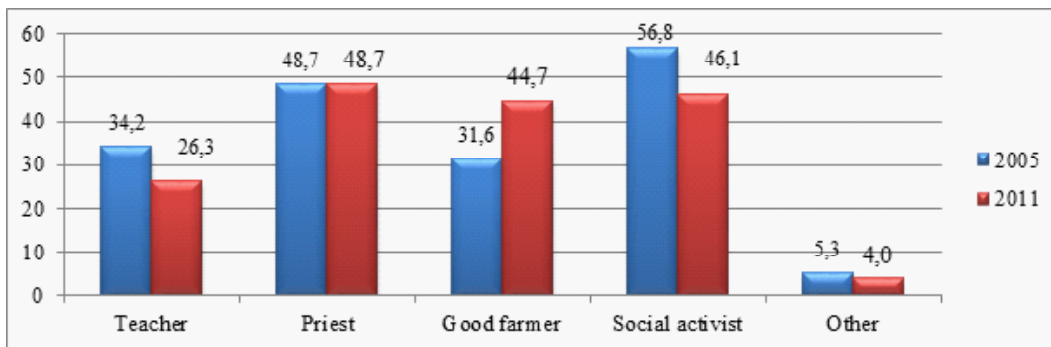


Fig. 10. Authorities of the community in rural areas in the years 2005–2011
Source: IAFE-NRI surveys, 2005, 2011.

Social activists are more willing to act in larger groups than they did in the past. The percentage of the villages where men and women were socially active together has increased. Also, the more numerous groups of such persons started forming which points to building of local social capital. Attention should also be paid to relatively high participation of the rural population in various types of meetings (Fig. 6), working in organizations (Fig. 7), performing functions in these organisations (Fig. 8).

All this translates into the level of trust of the rural society: what is close to us enjoys the higher level of trust, and what is far from us: central authority – lower (Fig. 9). We can observe the traditional value system, and somehow a Positivist approach: a good farmer is the one whose authority increased most (Fig. 10), this stresses the very important role played by such persons in the rural community.

One of the basic indicators illustrating the social activity is the dissemination of its institutionalised form i.e. various types of social organisations. In the rural environment in Poland, social organisations have always played a special role consisting in activities for meeting the needs of the general population, which often went beyond the statutory activities and objectives for which a given organisation was established (Sikorska, 1993).

The rural population also acts in various types of formal organisations. But this applies to less than every tenth adult. These are primar-

ily traditional organisations active in rural areas: Volunteer Fire Department, Women's organisations (including Farmers' Wives' Associations) and organisations functioning at churches, parish circles, religious groups. These groups not only survived the transformations of rural areas associated with Poland's accession to the EU and the previous political changes but also did not lose their dominant position.

As a result, the organisations active in rural areas have been perceived and evaluated primarily on the basis of the benefits of their projects for the entire community. There was a regional diversification of the villages, in which the members of the analysed social organisations were present. Such persons were more often present in the areas of Western Poland (Central-Western and South-Western macroregions), than in the areas of Eastern Poland. Relatively low participation in such organisations shows that the population is more willing to organise into groups, which are underpinned by a clearly defined objective to implement to a specific good to achieve. Such activities more often involve the society than formalised organisations. Therefore, the rural population feels more related to the local environment, it perceives the closer things in a better manner. This also translates into the fact the rural residents participate in the largest numbers in meetings regarding the issues of the countryside or in election meetings.

CONCLUSIONS

Improvement in the structure of agricultural holdings, the growing landless population as well as demographic changes taking place in rural areas in Poland in the second half of the 21st century result in a number of transformations in the social environment of the countryside. The structural image of these areas has been revalued. In the countryside, there is less and less agriculture and the resident population, while there is more population not associated with agriculture. This group includes retired farmers and other professionals as well as pensioners. This is also a consequence of migration, dynamic rural development, restructured agriculture, location near urban areas.

Noticeable is the fact that rural environment becomes similar to the urban environment; the clearly visible process of ageing of the society, significant increase in the level of education of the population, improvement in furnishing of dwellings, including the Internet which became an important tool for work.

In rural areas, mainly there are no non-agricultural jobs, the respondents indicated the problems with the insufficient level of income and with a decrease in income, but also the problems with selling of agricultural products, contracting. We should stress the fact that the persons (including the women) associated with agriculture are more satisfied with the changing reality, than those from the landless families.

Social activity of inhabitants of rural areas has also improved. Young people and women with higher education constituted a relatively low share among the socially active persons, which is a consequence of demographic changes (ageing of society, migration of young people). Social activists more willingly than in the previous period act in larger groups, which indicates development of a local social capital. Attention is drawn also to the fact that a relatively large number of inhabitants of rural areas participate in meetings, work in organisations, perform in them certain functions and are involved in the policy

issues. The population from farming families is more involved and active than the population from landless families in issues concerning rural communities. An emphasis should be put on this stratification and specific separation of landless population, which is less involved in common matters of rural communities.

Rural population is more willing to organise into groups which are guided by a clearly specified goal to execute or a specific good to achieve. Such activities more often involve the society and not the formalised organizations. The inhabitants of rural areas feel more connected with the local environment, better perceive their closest surroundings and gladly participate in electoral and rural meetings. All of that is reflected also in the level of trust of the rural society: what is closer enjoys a greater level of trust than what is far away, for example the central government.

The traditional system of values, in a way, a positivist approach may be observed: a good farmer is the one whose authority has increased the most, which emphasises his/her very important role in rural communities. Social changes in rural areas in Poland in the second half of the 21st century, covered also a fulfilment of social and economic aspirations of the population due to peripheral location of the village. Social changes in rural areas in Poland, in the second half of the 21st century, are also a kind of fulfilment of social and economic aspirations of the population due to the distant location of the countryside.

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