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SUMMARY

The authors of the texts presented in this book define selected problems of socio-economic development of contemporary Polish countryside and arrive at conclusions which are vital in light of the current public debate on medium- and long-term strategies of rural area development. Their knowledge of this topic should serve as substantive input in formulating strategic national plans.

The significant variations in levels of socio-economic development in Poland tend to particularly increase in severity within the boundaries of administrative regions (intra-regionally). Suburban zones typically show a faster pace of development, which leads to developmental asymmetry versus peripheral zones. This begets doubts whether the cohesion policy – as it is currently being implemented on the national and regional level – is correct and efficient. In light of this problem, striving for precisely formulating goals and improving the targeting of all forms of support based on public funding seems completely justified (Chapter 1).

Significant variations in the conditions of rural labour markets are another consequence of stratification in economic development. In general it can be said that a balanced labour market is typical for suburban zones of main Polish cities, where a relatively large supply balances out the demand for jobs. Paradoxically, a similar phenomenon is occurring in north-eastern Poland. It is caused mainly by two factors: severe progressing depopulation and demographic aging of the remaining population of these regions. A low supply of jobs is thus balanced out by relatively low demand. A deeper unbalancing of rural labour markets is to be expected in near future – this will be chiefly caused by modernisation of agriculture and substitution of workforce, as well as government policies in favour of extending retirement age, which will also concern rural populations to a degree. In this situation, limited options for employment outside agriculture might lead to increased hidden unemployment in rural areas (Chapter 2).

Proposed solutions to the problems of rural labour markets include ideas supporting:

- permanent migration to large urban centres,
- commuting – possible under favourable conditions,
- multidirectional development of villages.

These ideas tend to overlook the role of towns and small cities, which could serve as centres of local development. The intense spatial variation of development levels of rural areas makes it necessary to seek a compromise among the manifold proposed solutions to this problem – a compromise which would require selecting the right form of support for a given area, in accordance with the needs of its denizens and the potential of implementing a diverse toolkit while utilising local potential and resources for generating local sources of income.

Support for polarized development of the country – on one end of the spectrum there is significant support for metropolises, on the other there is far less support for rural areas – may lead to exclusion of small and average-sized towns from development processes due to insufficient utilisation of their endogenous potential. The direct consequences of these processes will include the formation of new peripheries and a deepening developmental chasm between large urban centres and rural areas (Chapter 3).

Examples of negative consequences of similar policies can be observed in numerous South American countries, as well as in the USA, which is commonly considered to display minimal developmental disproportions. Strengthening the ties of rural areas with their local urban centres, which act as their service providers, would facilitate increasing spatial cohesion, which in turn would allow the growth of integrated, harmoniously functioning local systems, fulfilling the needs of village and town communities. Another, more important result would be a more spatially balanced development of the whole country.

A vital task in the context of strategic planning for countrywide development – which also includes the development of rural areas – is diagnosing its spatial attractiveness to investors. This is a key factor in the process of determining investment locations both by domestic and foreign investors. In turn, the investments themselves strongly influence the direction and pace of transformation of economic structures – including agriculture – in many areas of the country. Poland exhibits significant spatial variations of investment attractiveness, which is mainly the result of long-term social and economic processes, as well as severe variations in the level of available technical infrastructure. The trend of diminishing investment attractiveness is clearly visible on the West-to-East axis – the farther east, the lower the investment attractiveness index. At the same time, urban agglomerations (often the capital cities of their regions), and to a slightly lesser degree their suburban zones, have

a high investment attractiveness index. This phenomenon occurs in all regions regardless of their absolute investment attractiveness value (Chapter 4).

Recent development changes are marked by polarisation, which means that the development cores of regions are being strengthened in relation to their peripheral zones. This raises the question: if certain development processes lead to deepening stratification, should they continue to be supported in light of the overarching goal of balanced national development? The answer is negative. Poland's regional policies should undergo modification.

The development policy of rural areas, which are significantly diversified (with all the consequences stemming from diversification), should focus mainly on encouraging investment, as this form of support is the most efficient – it has the highest returns relative to its initial value. This should enable farmers to implement modern, innovative technologies, as well as favour the dynamisation of non-agricultural employment of rural populations through investing into new jobs, work retraining programmes, supporting self-employment, organising centres for entrepreneurship, etc. The European Union-funded support programmes for agriculture and rural areas also have a significant added value in form of multiplication effects, both in agricultural and non-agricultural sectors, which contribute to economic development and creation of new jobs (Chapter 5).

The structure of Poland's agricultural sector determines a very low social efficiency of labour. Rural areas where agricultural activity dominates the region's economic structure tend to have lower levels of socio-economic development, as well as relatively low investment attractiveness. Polish farms also exhibit significant variations in yield of marketable agricultural output on a regional scale. The farms' level of yield is strongly correlated with their economic size. Recently, it has been observed that the farms' economic size is showing an increasing effect on their levels of yield relative to their physical size.

Faced with the task of shaping agricultural policy, it would be wise to define two types of farms (aside from the 10 or so definitions already present in Polish legislation). The first type would be a market-oriented farm of economic size exceeding 2 ESU¹, which should be the target of pro-efficiency and innovative instruments of support. The second type would be a rural family farm of economic size not exceeding 2 ESU, generating in fact no monetary income or a marginal income from the sale of

¹ The separation into farms of size above and below 2 ESU is a technical one, adapted to the requirements of FADN, the EU system for evaluating the income of agricultural holdings. However, there is a disparity in economic size in the subgroup of Polish farms over 2 ESU which should not be overlooked – they can be further subdivided into „developing” and „other”; it seems that the latter will gradually vanish as a basic group.

agricultural products. Data on the share of farms below 2 ESU in the sale of agricultural products can support this idea – in 2008 farms of this type, which comprise 62.3% of the total number of farms in Poland, have supplied a mere 5.6% of the market's supply of agricultural products. This proves that it is necessary to develop different policies for these farms as opposed to commercial ones. A dual policy of this type could possibly lead to a more efficient utilisation of EU and national instruments of support, and contribute to increasing the pace of economic growth (Chapter 6).

The many years of intensifying agricultural production in EU countries have significantly contributed to the devastation of ecosystems in many member states; now one of the main tasks of the EU is the prevention of similar negative processes. The introduction of a network of protected sites under the Natura 2000 programme is the material expression of this idea. In Poland, such sites make up ca. 20% of the area of the country; it seems – with all possible strictures – that they can be considered under-appreciated common property, as one of the sources of endogenous development potential of rural areas. Currently, these sites are seen as a significant barrier to economic development by local governments and communities, as well as businesses operating in the area. This problem is under-represented in national strategic documents, which barely touch upon the challenges and issues of environment. The pro-environmental paradigm of village development, which substantiates continuing support of agriculture and rural areas under the CAP after 2013 and is increasingly more discussed in EU circles, is almost absent as well (Chapter 7).

Dynamising the changes in rural areas and maintaining their vitality depends not only on financial support from sundry investments. Without the human factor, even the largest amounts of financial support granted by various programmes will not lead to the expected development. After all, it is humans themselves who create initiatives, form structures, and finally take on the responsibility for the future of the local community – all by their own activity and ability to cooperate. They form the base for changes in every society, rural or urban; they create social capital. The issues we have been recently observing – individualism, lack of community-centric thought and action, lack of appropriate institutions (both private and market-oriented), and increasing bureaucracy in EU programmes – should serve as a warning to creators of development programmes for the Polish countryside (Chapter 8). These problems, coupled with the polarising/diffusing model of regional development proposed by the Polish government, can cause significant apprehension with regard to the future of Poland's rural areas, and particularly its peripheral zones. Deepening developmental disparities can eventually become reality.

Rural system of education has made significant strides in the past years, which contributes to the shrinking of the gap between the village and the city. The largest

disparity remains in the access to preschool education. Working towards complete eradication of differences in conditions for education and child-rearing in rural and urban environments is an important factor in developing human capital, as well as in strengthening cultural capital in the countryside. The last two decades have proven that preschool education, which is fundamental for future educational achievements, has been clearly lagging behind the main stream of changes in education. No other area of education exhibits such significant disparities as the access, quality and universality of preschool education in rural and urban environments. In the school year 2009/2010 only around 17% of rural children under the age of 3 have attended preschool, as opposed to 59% of children in urban areas. Higher levels of education do not exhibit similar disparities – rural youth make similar choices in education as their urban counterparts, though they tend to be more careful with regard to long-term employment plans and usually make less-attractive choices (Chapter 9).

One of the factors with the potential to somewhat remedy the developmental delays in rural areas is the creation of the National Rural Network, intended to support developmental processes by transfer of best practices and positive experiences, as well as by increasing the coordination and complementarity of various initiatives for rural development, including those connected to EU instruments of support (Chapter 10). This goal is to be achieved by networking partners from various socio-economic sectors; it can be explained as creating a framework for cooperation on various geographical and substantial levels. This will in turn lead to strengthening existing social capital in rural areas and dynamising its activity on local and regional levels. The NRN is in an early stage of development; it is vital that it should enable the bottom-up approach typical for similar initiatives undertaken in other countries, which later proves beneficial to their efficient implementation.

The above issues are but a small fraction of the problems faced by the Polish countryside and the researchers in this field. The success of modernisation and restructuring of rural areas depends on many factors – from an honest diagnosis of their present state, through defining goals and priorities for the medium and long term, preparing (in close cooperation with social partners) support programmes tailored to the needs of the regions, to the creation of an efficient institutional environment which could expediently, efficiently and successfully distribute public support funding to potential beneficiaries. All these tasks require strengthened social capital on all levels of the nation's organisational structures. The recently-formed National Rural Network, which is in early stages of development, can become a useful mechanism for strengthening positive processes occurring in rural areas – in order to achieve this it is necessary to continue socialising and democratising this structure, and to dynamise its activities on the voivodship level.

