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Polish Countryside in Transition



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Polish Countryside in Transition

Quality of Life and Social Capital in Rural Areas

With 6 figures

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Introduction

This monograph discusses today's quality of life in the Polish countryside, intertwined with residents' social capital resources. In an attempt to describe the matter comprehensively and suggest potential trends, the authors examine critical socioeconomic issues that have shaped selected dimensions of the rural quality of life in Poland. The reader is offered a context for the transformations.

The Polish countryside embarked on the sociopolitical transformation journey, burdened with over 40 years of real socialism imposed on the country as a new geopolitical order after the Second World War (1945). This era was preceded by the 123 years of the Partitions. At that time, Poland did not exist as a state. The rule of the three invaders, Russia, Prussia, and Austria, resulted in different levels of socioeconomic development across the Partitions. Since the 1990s, the development trends in the Polish rural areas have been guided by the social transformation (symbolically anchored in the demolition of socialism in 1989) and accession to the European Union in 2004.

At the very beginning of the sociopolitical transformation, the Polish countryside faced new challenges of working towards European Union membership. It gained access to pre-accession funds. Their impact went beyond mere adaptation to the legal and infrastructural framework of the European Union. The low level of social capital was a true challenge for the post-socialist country. Social trust shortages among the rural population hindered their potential for cooperation and using local resources for the public good. The axionormative system, rooted in the attitude towards authorities, reinforced the entitlement mindset towards state institutions and new local government mechanisms. The countryside was plagued by learned helplessness and social problems, including poverty, limited accessibility of social services—such as health care and education—transport exclusion, and digital exclusion. European Union Policies, among them the Common Agricultural Policy, contributed to changes in many functional areas of rural communities in line with a vision of sustainable, multifunctional, smart, and resilient development. Development fuelled by the ef-

fective use of local community potential is a pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy.

The several decades of socioeconomic transformation and European Union membership have had a profound impact. The outlined context for the changes they brought about provides a backdrop for discussing the selected aspects of rural quality of life, particularly rural social capital. The authors found it rather challenging to agree on the choice of attributes to investigate.

The monograph is the product of the combined academic potential of sociologists from various Polish universities: the University of Agriculture in Kraków, AGH University of Science and Technology in Kraków, the University of Lodz in Łódź, and the University of Silesia in Katowice. The publication's added value lies in the diversity of perspectives on the countryside and rural social changes. The reported survey, followed by the qualitative input delving deeper into some issues, focuses on matters the authors believe to be most consequential for quality of life in rural areas.

The monograph comprises four chapters. The first chapter outlines the state of the Polish countryside right before the sociopolitical transformation and as it embarked on the quest to join the European Union. The authors attempted to delineate a research design based on the past evolutionary trends and literature review.

Chapter II begins with an explanation of the qualitative and quantitative research methodology. It identifies the research problem and techniques. The sample description therein provides the sociodemographic and socioeconomic profile of the 1,600 respondents from rural areas. The reader is invited to start the journey into rural quality of life with a review of relevant concepts and theories. Quality of life in rural areas is evaluated with a survey.

Chapter III focuses on the social capital of the Polish countryside. After introducing the theoretical framework for the problem, the authors analyse social trust among the rural population, their value systems, networks, social support, and social engagement.

The last chapter examines the outcomes of auxiliary qualitative interviews that add depth to the survey results. This analysis involves contributions from rural community leaders representing local action groups from diverse rural regions. The interviewees shared their views on the perceived and expected changes in rural infrastructure, social services, social capital of local communities, and the future of the Polish countryside in terms of quality of life.

The analyses are summarised with key final conclusions.

It is our intention to help the reader improve their understanding of the fundamentals of the quality of life in the Polish countryside, as well as the desirable future trajectories of changes. While acknowledging the limitations

inherent in the research perspective and nature of survey research, we hope to offer valuable and satisfactory insights.

The authors

Chapter I.

Polish countryside before and after European Union accession

1.1 Polish countryside on the verge of sociopolitical transformation

Rural areas cover 93% of Poland's territory. They are home to about 40% of the country's population. Therefore, Poland is a 'rural' country, but by no means is its rurality uniform. The countryside includes urbanised periurban areas with highly functional transport links to the city and very sophisticated social infrastructure inhabited by a commuting population, where agricultural production is mainly negligible or non-existent. But its other face is sparsely populated areas with scattered developments, traditional agricultural practices, poor road network and social infrastructure, under depopulation pressure, or even at risk of abandonment. A Polish rural economist, Jerzy Wilkin,¹ contends that the countryside holds most of Poland's natural resources, including a large part of its human resources, production and material resources, and cultural assets. Their consumption affects the development of the countryside, its residents, and the entire society.

Before any visions of rural development can be embarked upon, rural resources must be diagnosed, taking into account typical rural processes of *longue durée*. The social change is seldom radical. Some processes have more significant momentum, and some are much slower. The differences may have sociohistorical roots. An analysis of the Polish social change must consider the period preceding the country's formal existence, the serfdom, which started in the fifteenth century and ended at different times depending on the partition, and the reality after the Second World War, influenced by the USSR.

Poland's existence as a state ceased for 123 years. Various parts of her territory were controlled by Russia, Prussia, and Austria-Hungary from 1772 (the First Partition) to 1918 (independence after the First World War).² In economic terms,

1 Wilkin 2011.

2 Perkins 1896; Lukowski 2014.

the most favourable situation was in the Prussian Partition, where agriculture and public transport networks developed relatively well. In 1910, 35% of its population lived in cities, continuously growing more industrialised. The quality of transport connections is evident from the density of railway lines in 1914, which was 11.2 km per 100 km², facilitating the transport of produced commodities (agricultural and industrial goods). The residents of the partition (such historical regions as Greater Poland, Silesia, and Pomerania) socialised norms and values typical of capitalism.³ At the same time, cities in the Austrian Partition (the historical Eastern European Galicia) housed 20% of its population, and the railway density was 5.6 km per 100 km². The advancement of agriculture in this region was hindered by the Austria-Hungarian policy and suboptimal farming conditions in the region (such as soil quality and topography). The Russian Partition developed the worst. Although 22% of its population lived in cities, the railway density was only 3.6 km per 100 km². Not even all cities were connected to the rail network.⁴

The debate on the impact of the Partitions on the socioeconomic diversity in Poland is ongoing. Some scholars believe the repercussions of the nineteenth-century divisions persist to the present day. Irena Grosfeld and Ekaterina Zhuravskaya⁵ wrote, *The three parts of divided Poland differed along many dimensions, but only some of them turned out to be persistent. Differences in income, education, formal institutions, corruption, and trust in government among the three empires disappeared with time as they were smoothed by economic forces and policy intervention. In contrast, differences in intensity of religious practices and in beliefs in democratic ideals, i. e., democratic capital, persist presumably via inter-generational within-family transmission. Differences in railroad infrastructure built by empires during industrialization persist to this day. Cultural empire legacies have an effect on the political outcomes in contemporary Poland.* Other researchers argue that the regions of Poland had already differed significantly before the Partitions, and the differences aggravated over the decades. The main driver was supposedly society internalising values of a capitalistic economy rather than the division among the three invaders. These values came from Western, not Eastern Europe. Russia was considered less developed than the West. Poles' attitude towards Austria was unclear. Germany and Prussia were more attractive thanks to their higher economic and lifestyle levels. People tried to emulate those who were the richest. Regions closer to other Western European countries that experienced more frequent interactions with Western culture

3 Hryniewicz 2003.

4 Churski / Herodowicz / Konecka-Szydłowska / Perdał 2021.

5 Grosfeld / Zhuravskaya 2015, p. 55.

developed faster as their residents observed and absorbed such values as diligence, frugality, and openness to change.⁶

The developmental issues in the Polish countryside are also linked to the impact of about many centuries of serfdom, even though Poland was not the only country with this system.⁷ From the late fifteenth century onwards, each consecutive Act of the noble Sejm resulted in peasants becoming almost completely, nearly judicially, dependent on the lords and bound to land. They could not leave the village without the landlord's permission, could not seek education (only one son of the peasant could be educated outside the village), and were obliged to pay rent and taxes. Physical violence against peasants was widespread.⁸⁹ Only the nobility was entitled to inherit land and yield power. Only nobles could hold high state offices, be officers or priests.¹⁰

Serfdom varied depending on whether the peasant lived in the royal domain, the glebe, or leased land from the nobility.¹¹ It was also important whether it was Russian, Prussian, or Austrian Partition.¹² The principles of coexistence of peasants and lords varied over time. For example, in the second half of the fifteenth century (as opposed to a later time), rent and corvee were equivalent (more corvee meant less rent and vice versa).¹³ Serfdom also depended on the personal relationships between the lord and the peasants, which largely determined its severity.

Peasant enfranchisement differed across the partitions. The last one to free peasants was the Russian Partition in 1864.¹⁴ It was opposed not only by landowners but also by peasants themselves due to the imposition of substantial taxes on the granted land. The cycle of changes leading to enfranchisement in the

6 Hryniewicz 2003.

7 Trethewey 1974.

8 Leszczyński 2020.

9 Pobłocki 2016.

10 Kuligowski 2016, p. 71.

11 In royal and church villages, the peasant could appeal against a starost's or other official's decision with a higher authority. Nobility privileges did not apply in the royal domain, so the *corvée* could not be increased there. In the royal domain, there was a self-government system known as *gromada* (assembly). The *gromada* consisted of the people of the village led by the village mayor. An organised *gromada* held real power, even though they were still the lord's subjects. Rent and payments were consulted with the *gromada*, and internal justice was administered by the village jury (*tawa wiejska*).

12 In Royal Prussia, *folwarks* (manors) relied to a large extent on hired labour and seasonal workers. In such *folwarks*, labour was more productive, which was then reflected in the profits from the sale of produce.

13 Kuligowski 2016, pp. 72, 76.

14 Except for the Kingdom of Poland. Serfdom was abolished there in 1864 after the fiasco of the January Uprising.

Prussian Partition started in the first decade of the nineteenth century.¹⁵ The process was completed in 1872. Serfdom was abolished in the Austrian Partition in 1848. The Revolutions of 1848 and the Tzar's fear of peasant rebellion precipitated the process. Villages were overcrowded, and agricultural land was highly fragmented, leading to extreme poverty among the peasant population. Consequently, substantial numbers emigrated to other countries, including the USA¹⁶ and Canada.¹⁷

Serfdom and the *folwark-corvée* economy were decisive for rural development, especially attitudes towards work exhibited by the layabout nobility and peasants who feigned work in the lord's fields.¹⁸ If descendants of impoverished peasants accumulated any assets at all, they did so only to use them in times of need. This attitude underpinned their attachment to land, intense boundary conflicts in villages, and focusing support primarily on the immediate family, and mistrust towards strangers. After enfranchisement, the countryside became synonymous with poverty and backwardness. This fact is reflected in the Polish language; for example, '*wieśniak*' (peasant, village resident) and '*burak*' (beetroot, bumpkin) are still used as derogatory terms for uneducated and inadequate people.¹⁹ Maria Halamska,²⁰ a Polish rural sociologist, added that the historical Partition heritage of the Polish countryside still weighs on the rhythm of change in the Polish rural areas, including disagrarisation.

Poland regained independence in November 1918 after the First World War ended. The unification process could finally begin after over a century of parts of Poland functioning in different political and socioeconomic systems. It was a complicated and lengthy process partly because of the agrarian problem involving the need to enable holders of small fields to acquire land from the landed gentry at preferential prices. The outbreak of the Second World War brought the transformation to a halt.

Poland was reborn in 1945. The post-war agreements deprived Poland of some of its land in the east taken by the USSR and granted her much smaller areas in the west (Silesia, Western Pomerania, Free City of Gdansk, and East Prussia near Olsztyn). Nearly all Germans were forced out of the former German territories and replaced with people from the eastern lands lost by Poland. The country became a Soviet satellite state. At that time, the countryside was primarily agrarian. From 1944 to 1989, agriculture was free from the impact of typical

15 A regulatory edict was proclaimed in 1811 allowing peasants to acquire land by paying the lord a compensation. The process was called the Prussian path towards capitalism.

16 Śreniowski 1956.

17 Kieniewicz 2016.

18 Kuligowski 2016.

19 Grochowski 2017.

20 Halamska 2011.

capitalistic market mechanisms. The government attempted to collectivise it. The result was state agricultural holdings (Państwowe Gospodarstwo Rolne, PGR) modelled after Soviet kolkhozes. Collectivisation was abandoned in 1956. Not only did individual farms survive in Poland,²¹ but private ownership of agricultural production assets, such as individual, family-owned holdings dominated.²²

During the period of the Polish People's Republic, the countryside was considered an inferior place to live. The Marxist propaganda portrayed it as a place where people toiled, lived in harsh conditions, were uneducated, and had no chance to improve their professional or social position. As Jerzy Wilkin noted, 'Marxists promoted the hypothesis that the primary criterion of rural development would be to even out any differences between the urban and the rural. They believed the countryside should follow the city, not vice versa. This notion materialised in the form of villages built around state agricultural holdings, with several-storey high residential buildings and an urban approach to spatial planning'.²³

Burdened by the difficult history, the Polish countryside embarked on a period of transformation in 1989 that would lay the foundations for integration with the European Union. The transformation commenced with an economic crisis, with the countryside absorbing excess labour released by the declining industry, thereby becoming a buffer for unemployment and suffering from hidden unemployment.²⁴ Rural areas were very diversified both internally and across regions. The differences were the echoes of the Partitions, post-war border adjustments, and forty years of real socialism.²⁵ It has been the place of *longue durée* processes, found in Western and Central Europe as well, such as disagrarisation, deruralisation, restratification, and the emergence of a new model of agriculture.²⁶

Disagrarisation has been observed since the early twentieth century. It involves gradually reducing agriculture's impact on the national economy. It is closely linked to deruralisation, which means a decline in the share of rural population within the overall country population. At the beginning of the twentieth century, 70% of Poland's population resided in rural areas, and agriculture was the primary sector of the economy. Today, the rural population constitutes approximately 40% of the total population, with agriculture contributing about 3% of the GDP. Notably, agriculture is not a source of income for

21 Churski / Herodowicz / Konecka-Szydłowska / Perdał 2021.

22 Poczta 2020.

23 Wilkin, 2008 p. 23.

24 Bukraba-Rylska 2009.

25 Churski / Herodowicz / Konecka-Szydłowska / Perdał 2021.

26 Halamska 2011.

70% of the economically active rural population.²⁷ The declining educational and income disparity between urban and rural populations is indicative of restratification, a change in the rural social structure, which accelerated during the socioeconomic transformation. This trend intensified after Poland joined the EU, and the income situation of farmers improved.²⁸ Restratification due to the changed educational structure of the rural population differentiated its members not only in terms of financial capabilities but also opinions, attitudes, and behaviour. Maria Halamska²⁹ believed this to upset the social cohesion in the countryside and emphasised the rift between the younger and older generations.

Disagrarisation and restratification justified abandoning agrocentrism, a perspective where agriculture was the central sector of the rural economy and the point of reference for all activities towards rural development. A new economic model emerged in the countryside, where food production was no longer fundamental.³⁰ Agriculture also diversified, affecting the growth of macroregions in Poland. Some are dominated by small farms (mainly Lesser Poland and Subcarpathia, south of Poland), where most small holdings (2–2.5 ha on average) engage in subsistence farming. In others, subsistence farms are a marginal component of the structure overwhelmed by extensive holdings. It is the case in western and northern Poland (Dolnośląskie, Lubuskie, Zachodniopomorskie, and Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodeships).³¹

When Poland joined the European Union, the Polish countryside embarked on the developmental path of sustainable and multifunctional development. New prospects emerged, promising to make it a nice place to live.

1.2 Concepts of rural transitions in Poland after accession to the European Union

The vision for the growth of European rural areas is linked to the Common Agricultural Policy framework, although it underwent radical changes before Poland accessed the European Union. The ramifications of the development model based on food deficits after the Second World War reverberated through history. The fundamental tenets of the Common Agricultural Policy were redefined due to the industrialisation of agriculture, degradation of the natural environment, biodiversity loss, surplus products, and many other problems. Ad-

27 Halamska / Stanny / Wilkin 2018, pp. 17–19.

28 Halamska 2011.

29 Ibidem.

30 Nurzyńska / Drygas 2018.

31 Stanny 2020.

ditionally, the 1990s saw calls for a return to localism and criticism of globalisation and productivism. The concept of sustainable development grew in popularity.³²

It focuses on considering the economic, social, and environmental aspects in the context of development. Economic development is closely integrated with a new perception of the production function of the countryside and appreciation of its non-productive functions (including residential and recreational). Non-agricultural activities become more important because the countryside is to be a place of professional development for all residents, not only those involved in agriculture. Business activity is intended to address the needs of the increasingly diverse rural community, but also to build ties between the rural local and non-local, with closer and more distant socioeconomic environments. On the other hand, social development aims to improve the subjective and objective quality of rural life. In other words, life quality is no longer considered a simple function of household income level or access to water, sewer, road, or soft infrastructure (education, health care, public facilities, etc.) in rural areas. Social capital resources now reflect the quality of life: the strength of social ties, the level of trust, and readiness to collaborate for the common interest linked to approved social norms and values. The attitude of the rural population toward the environment is also an indicator of the quality of life. It cannot be the price communities pay for economic and social development. Natural resources should be preserved for posterity and restored rather than degraded.

As a long-term process, sustainable development is not limited to any programming horizon.^{33,34} Its principles are entwined with those of the next concept that shapes the shared developmental vision of the European countryside, the idea of multifunctional development. It means integrating new non-agricultural functions into the rural space, which helps to diversify the rural economy and move away from monofunctional development that makes the local economy dependent on agricultural production.³⁵ Being a space of multifunctional development open to entrepreneurship, the countryside becomes a workplace for many professions. The multifunctionality forced by disararisation makes the latter more profound. It is not only a growth of non-agricultural activities but also a change in the rural lifestyle, norms, values, and social attitudes. Disararisation—when the share of rural residents who exhibit typical farmer characteristics (land ownership/use) declines—significantly affects social transformations.³⁶ Family farming used to engage entire families, define their

32 Halamska 2018.

33 Halamska 2018.

34 Zegar 2018.

35 Kłodziński 2012.

36 Rosner / Stanny 2018.

rhythm of life, clearly specify periods of intensive field work and time to rest, and determine life priorities and aspirations. It affected the social capital resources of rural communities. In the Polish, post-serfdom and postsocialist society, these resources were activated mainly within the family and the closest neighbours. These were the groups where trust and willingness to provide mutual help emerged, also when it came to fieldwork. Self-help was fostered by the shortages in farm production means, including a lack of machinery. To overcome this, work during harvest was done either manually or with tools only trusting neighbours would lend. Transformations in agriculture changed the attitudes towards rural community building, including attitudes towards rural business. Departure from agriculture opened a gap for new forms of activity among the rural population (as an alternative to unemployment hidden in subsistence holdings incapable of developing any further). The emergence of professionally managed farming agriculture aimed at economic profits led to the release of redundant human resources into local and non-local economies. Therefore, multifunctional development means not only growth in the non-agricultural employment in the countryside but also appreciation and highlighting of its non-productive functions. These are the residential and recreational functions but also such public services as the protection of landscape, biodiversity, soil (against erosion and flood), and water systems (against drought and contamination).³⁷

Still, multifunctional development is not flawless. It is supposed to prevent depopulation, strengthen the local economy, and emphasise the importance of the countryside for society, not just the rural population. Still, it may cause conflicts between agricultural and non-agricultural functions of the countryside, aggravate disagrarisation, and deepen the crisis of traditional rural identity. The increased weight of residential functions, especially in periurban zones, may lead to urbanisation of the countryside, blurring of the rural landscape, and spatial conflicts between the native residents and urban migrants who perceive the village as a private green settlement where no social relationships with neighbours are necessary.³⁸

Sustainable and multifunctional development is considered the precondition of rural resilience.³⁹ This development concept is relatively new. Wim Heijman and colleagues first introduced it to the literature in 2007.⁴⁰ They defined rural resilience as an ability to adapt to changing external conditions in a way that ensures the preservation of a satisfactory standard of living while addressing the countryside's characteristic sensibility of the environmental, economic, and

37 Kutkowska / Hasiński 2018.

38 Rosner / Stanny 2018.

39 Knickel et al. 2018.

40 Heijman/Hagelaar/ Heide von der 2007.

social subsystems. Rural resilience to crises, including climate change, grows more relevant by the decade. Resilience, defined as the ability to regenerate and be open to developmental opportunities, is also the ability to face various challenges successfully.⁴¹ Multifunctional areas with diversified economies are believed to be more resilient. In the era of energy crises, power-generating capabilities (like biomass combustion) are particularly valuable. They are a specific combination of economic development and environmental protection. Furthermore, resilience determines how much a rural area tolerates change until it reorganises itself around new structures and processes.⁴² It also reflects how well the area is able to balance the ecological, economic, and social functions.

Today, the resilience discourse tends to abandon the reactive, passive bounce-back metaphor and highlights the proactive human agency.⁴³ The interest in agent-oriented resilience among scholars and practitioners leads to the question of the state of rural social capital resources and the agency of rural communities.⁴⁴ Therefore, it stimulates the discussion on the relationships between rural resilience and the local development management model and the role of rural community participation in the model. In other words, it links rural resilience and good governance. It seems particularly important to identify the interweaving relationships between the endogenous growth potential of a community, especially in times of crisis, and the rural change management model in post-socialist countries where the limited—or barely existent—social capital resources make it harder to deploy the two concepts in practice.⁴⁵

As Mark Shucksmith⁴⁶ points out, ‘good countryside’ is both sustainable and resilient. Its proactive citizens co-steward local development and take responsibility for the economy alongside the public sector. This inclusive countryside embraces migrants and those who come from cities. It encourages dialogue and seeks ways to remove social and economic development barriers and protect the natural environment. This countryside, Shucksmith believes, requires networked development and neo-endogenous development, a combination of internal resources typical of the specific community with external drivers and resources (that are non-local, that is, national and global).⁴⁷ What is the Polish countryside in 2024? What are its social capital resources? What is the quality of life there? Which resources promote rural resilience? These are the questions addressed by

41 Bład, 2022.

42 Ibidem.

43 Bład, 2022.

44 Skerratt 2013.

45 Steiner / Markantoni 2014.

46 Shucksmith 2016.

47 Gorlach 2024.

the research project the results of which are presented in the consecutive chapters of the monograph.

1.3 Developmental challenges in the Polish countryside

The modern history of the Polish countryside has been affected by two pivotal events: the sociopolitical transformation started in 1989 and Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004. This section outlines the developmental challenges in the Polish countryside determined by trends in the socioeconomic transformation guided by market economy principles and EU standards.

Initially, the sociopolitical transformation required that society, economy leaders, and businesspeople take bold, often risky decisions typical of entrepreneurial people. The countryside, dominated by state agricultural holdings, lacked proactive and independent people. Those few individuals who formed then-elites did not manage to change the fate of the Polish countryside. The sale and waste of many state-owned holdings and processing plants positioned the rural population on the sidetrack of the decisive changes.

Over a dozen years later, Poles—including those in the countryside—faced the monumental act of Poland joining the European Union, which entailed as much hope as it did anxiety. The following subsection depicts the socioeconomic situation in the Polish countryside before Poland became part of the EU. It focuses mainly on the model of agriculture, the impact of pre-accession programmes, and the adaptation of public administration to EU frameworks. Finally, it looks at education as a factor critical for innovation and openness to challenges to improve the quality of work and life in rural areas.

The subsection then compares the condition of the Polish countryside at the beginning of the EU membership with forecasts and expectations of the Polish society proposed in various literature sources. This juxtaposition will serve as a benchmark for the authors and a reference for their original research conclusions, especially when evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the Polish countryside's potential. This part focuses on aspects also covered by the research discussed further in the monograph. The authors discuss rural depopulation and population ageing, mainly in the context of farmers. Other topics include the social activity of rural communities and their interpersonal relationships.

The authors portray the Polish countryside after 2004 and the current demographic trends that determine its profile and trajectories of changes. They also comment on the level of entrepreneurship, which defines more than just the desired direction of changes towards the multifunctional development of the Polish countryside. Adherence to the pre-defined path, where entrepreneurship is the key, engagement in non-agricultural activities by the rural community, and

expansion beyond agricultural production are necessary for the survival of the Polish countryside.

1.3.1 The socioeconomic situation in the Polish countryside before accession

The early 1990s brought great hopes for a better future for Poles. The socioeconomic transformation pointed the way towards democratic standards and a market economy. The reality, however, turned out to be much harder and more complicated. The primary reason was the ‘shock therapy’ administered by the then-deputy prime minister and minister of finance in Tadeusz Mazowiecki’s cabinet, Leszek Balcerowicz. The Balcerowicz Plan focused on economic and systemic reforms necessary to transition from a centrally planned economy to a market economy. The ‘shock therapy’ was both the starting point and consequence of the changes that were too rapid and implemented over a too short a period. The most painful consequence for Polish society was unemployment. About 3,000 people (equivalent to a large workplace) were laid off daily in the first three years of the transformation (1990–1993).⁴⁸ Rural incomes plummeted. Agricultural income in holdings that kept ledgers declined by 54.7% from 1990 to 1999.⁴⁹ In 2003, 53% of individual agricultural holdings (over one million) were out of business. They were no longer functional or switched to subsistence farming.⁵⁰ According to the National Census 2002,⁵¹ about 3.5 million people (or one-fourth of the rural population) lived in absolute poverty. According to Statistics Poland’s household budget survey, 71% of the rural population lived below the subsistence minimum in 2003 (59% in total in Poland).⁵²

Before Poland joined the European Union, a broad trend appeared whereby environmental threats spread eastwards from Western Europe, including Poland. This process, known as Western eco-colonialism⁵³ or environmental imperialism,⁵⁴ exacerbated environmental and socioeconomic inequalities. Eastern European countries were poorer and less experienced with civic and ecological activities than Western Europe, making them more vulnerable to environmental exploitation.⁵⁵

48 Gomułka 1992.

49 Staszyński 2010, p. 14.

50 Józwiak 2003.

51 <https://stat.gov.pl/spisy-powszechne/narodowe-spisy-powszechne/narodowy-spis-powszechny-2002/>.

52 Statistics Poland 2008.

53 Harper 2006(a).

54 Lewis 2009.

55 Harper 2006(b).

After the socioeconomic change of 1989, the ‘village renewal’ movement started to spread from Europe to the Polish countryside. It was particularly relevant because the countryside had been marginalised compared to the city. The term ‘village renewal’ comes from Austrian and German *Dorferneuerung*. It has come to replace debased names of activities such as community action work, cooperative movement, contests for the most beautiful homestead, etc., tainted by associations with socialism. Already in the early days of the transformation, some voiced concerns about the rural population becoming a burden for the market economy and even democracy.⁵⁶ The same fears were repeated in subsequent years. The Polish countryside was seen as weighing down the necessary reforms, and Polish agriculture was labelled backward and inefficient.⁵⁷ The general discourse on the development direction and challenges the Polish countryside faced before the accession and after 2004⁵⁸ proposed Western Europe as an example of apt political decisions regarding agriculture and good practices implemented in the sector.⁵⁹ Regrettably, the serious weak points of these actions were downplayed. For example, agricultural market intervention funds in the member states of the European Communities from 1971 to 1992 grew seventeen times over, but 80% of the money went to 20% of holdings that owned about 70% of agricultural land.⁶⁰

The devastated natural environment and rural depopulation were supposed to be healed by the family farming model favoured in the European Union. The approach was advocated in Poland as well. A former French minister of agriculture urged the Polish government in 2000 to obtain funds from the European Commission to preserve small family holdings and avoid the mistakes of EU countries that led to rural depopulation. Unfortunately, the appeal failed to convince Polish decision-makers because it was the complete opposite of the ongoing agriculture restructuring programme, which has resulted in long-term poverty in many Polish families.⁶¹ Note that the changes the transformation brought to the countryside redefined how farmers perceived and acted in relation to land.

The agribusiness structure of the countries that joined the European Union after 2004 is dominated by sectors directly involved in food production. On the other hand, the primary sectors in the agribusiness of developed countries are the

56 Rychard / Federowicz 1993.

57 Fedyszak-Radziejowska 1995.

58 Poland joined the European Union on 1 May 2004.

59 Sahrbacher 2011.

60 Poczta 2020.

61 Staszyński 2010, p. 14.

food industry, the production of agricultural machinery and equipment, and services for agriculture and the food industry.⁶²

Despite the past and present effects of Poland's efforts to transform the Polish countryside, funding is of central importance. Money earmarked by the European Union for specific goals defined how the Polish countryside developed. Some funds from pre-accession programmes such as PHARE – Poland and Hungary: Assistance for Restructuring their Economies, PAOW – Rural Activation Programme, and SAPARD – Special Accession Programme for Agriculture & Rural Development supported social structure change. The objective of PAOW was to promote labour reskilling. SAPARD provided funds to aid businesses in creating new jobs in rural areas.⁶³

Another factor that determined the development of the Polish countryside before the accession was changes in public administration. European Union funds for rural local governments fuelled actions prioritised in the EU policy, such as empowering local communities, motivating society towards grassroots efforts for their 'local homelands', and supporting entrepreneurship and innovation.

Obviously, spending European funds is not the only function of rural local governments. The absorption of the funds necessitates aligning local governments' activities with EU procedures and laws. In the long term, the adjustments furthered changes in priorities, municipal governance, and local policy implementation. These changes can be expected to take root and guide the collective mentality of the rural population and future rural development policies.⁶⁴

One of the principal challenges for the Polish countryside on the verge of the new millennium was improving the education level. Better awareness and education of young rural residents boosted their labour market opportunities. First, these new prospects and social advancement were linked to migration to cities. Successive years have changed how the countryside is perceived as a place to live and work. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the rural social structure changed substantially. Young rural residents participated in an educational revolution aimed at improving the level of education in the countryside. About 25% of rural residents had at least secondary education at the turn of the century, which means a 10 pp increase in ten years.⁶⁵

62 Leitão / Paiva / Thomé 2024.

63 Wilkin 2004.

64 Karvatska / Yuriychuk / Chepel 2023.

65 Weiss / Heinz-Fischer 2022.

1.3.2 Forecasts of changes in the Polish countryside after the accession to the European Union

How did people imagine the future of the countryside after the accession? Jerzy Wilkin et al.⁶⁶ called for subjective treatment of local communities that were the beneficiaries of the rural change, which means that any redefining of the role of rural areas and transition from strictly agricultural functions to sustainable development had to be acceptable and beneficial for them. The authors referred to the practices and experiences of Western Europe, where residents were involved in implementing civic society standards. These methods promoted individual and collective responsibility for the space people live in. They further emphasised the need to resolve social problems at the local rather than national level. Another critical aspect was resident participation in local development governance. The scholars also expected regional authorities and local governments (including municipal authorities) to become more relevant. Note that participation in decision-making requires that rural residents have adequate knowledge and skills (human capital) and can use this capital to take joint action and pursue common goals (social capital).

Bogdan Klepacki⁶⁷ believes the differences between the urban and the rural will worsen. In his opinion, rural prosperity depended on the economic situation in cities. He called for support for the most competitive producers. Still, this support has led to rural depopulation in EU15. Therefore, business diversification and promotion of education in general seem better ideas.

Another problem explored for over a decade is the ageing population, especially alarming in the countryside because of lower population density, abandonment of agriculture, and ageing farmers who have trouble handing down the holding to the younger generation. This situation was expected to mobilise the growth of the social services market for older people.⁶⁸ According to 2050 demographic forecasts, Poland's population will grow older. By 2050, the general population is expected to decline by 4.5 million, while the older population will increase. According to Statistics Poland's forecast, the population aged 60 and over will be 10.8 million in 2030 and 12.3 million in 2040. In 2050, the country will have 13.7 million older people, representing 40.4% of its population. Urban seniors will constitute 23.5% of the population, and rural older residents 16.8%. The 2050 urban population will consist of older people in 42.4%. They will make up 37.8% of the rural population.⁶⁹ Regrettably, the increase in the older popu-

66 Wilkin / Budzich-Szukała / Saloni 2005, pp. 22–24.

67 Klepacki 2005, pp. 75–93.

68 Michalska / Rosa / Kamiński 2019.

69 Statistics Poland(d) 2023.

lation does not entail the creation of new care facilities in rural areas. According to the definition in Article 18(1) of the Act of 27 August 2004 on publicly funded healthcare services, 'a patient who stays at a care and treatment, nursing and care, or medical rehabilitation facility that provides 24-hour services covers the cost of lodgings and food. The monthly fee is 250% of the lowest monthly retirement pension but not more than 70% of the patient's monthly income as defined in welfare regulations.'⁷⁰ The limited availability of public care facilities, combined with the rapid growth in the older population, has resulted in a continuous increase in private facilities. The monthly cost of such a service is 4,000 to 14,000 złotys (900 to 3,300 euros).⁷¹ According to the Social Insurance Institution, the average gross retirement pension in Poland in 2023 was 4013 złotys (940 euros) for men and 2793 złotys (655 euros) for women. All pensioners' average gross retirement pension in 2024 was approximately 3,500 złotys (800 euros).⁷²

The issue of old age in the context of demand for social and nursing services in the Polish countryside was investigated as part of a research project⁷³ undertaken by one of the co-authors of the monograph. Its purpose was to collect opinions on the demand for innovative services to promote activity among older people and prevent social exclusion of people at risk of loneliness or loss of health and functional abilities. Eight hundred and fifty-seven interviews were conducted with individuals providing care to persons aged 60 and over. Over half of the respondents (57.6%) reported that the seniors lived alone, more in cities (61.5%) than in the countryside (45.4%).⁷⁴ These results indicate not only the problem of loneliness in old age but also potential challenges for older people in the countryside regarding access to soft and hard infrastructure.

Another part of the GROWID⁷⁵ project was a survey among 1001 older people aged 60 and over. Half of the respondents believed it more challenging for older people to live in the countryside, while 12.4% thought their lives were more manageable. A similar portion (13.4%) perceived no difference between rural and urban life.

70 Act of 27 August 2004 on publicly funded healthcare services, Journal of Laws of 2004, No. 210, item 2135.

71 Knapik 2020.

72 <https://businessinsider.com.pl/praca/emerytura/ile-trzeba-zarabiac-aby-liczyc-na-4-tysiace-zlotych-emerytura/0ype1zb>.

73 Project The Role of Care Farming in Rural Development in Light of Demographic Challenges (GROWID), ID: 381773, co-funded by the Polish National Centre for Research and Development under the project Social and Economic Development of Poland Among Globalising Markets, Gospostrateg contract No. 1/381773/17/NCBR/2018; project period: 01.01.2019–31.08.2022 (extended by six months due to the COVID-19 pandemic).

74 <https://growid.pl/zadania/>.

75 Ibidem.

Regarding social activity in rural areas, voluntary fire brigades and farm wives associations have always been the leading organisations. In 2010, scholars reported that ‘the decomposition of the rural institutional space, which is spreading across the Polish countryside will probably lead to the degeneration or complete atrophy of the role of old institutions such as farm wives associations, voluntary fire brigades, neighbour aid, and family farming.’⁷⁶ This catastrophic scenario never materialised. There were 15,409 voluntary fire brigades in Poland on 18 May 2023.⁷⁷

Farm wives associations have always been the main form of self-organisation in the Polish countryside regarding membership and scale of activities, second only to voluntary fire brigades. They initially accompanied farmers associations. Farm wives associations used to provide auxiliary services to support fieldwork, such as childcare during harvest. Today, their links to agriculture have weakened, although they still exist. Thanks to new 2018 legislation, new associations emerge and are registered every year. There were 14,340 farm wives associations in Poland on 2 July 2024.⁷⁸

The ageing population issue is inextricably linked to the atrophy of social ties, reported two decades ago. At the same time, family ties are degrading as multigenerational families fade and rural depopulation gains momentum. Also, connections with the workplace environment weaken due to the popularity of early retirement. Some hoped the ties could be reinforced by building a sense of belonging to ‘small homelands’, but it was unclear whether the belonging would be sufficient to produce strong enough social ties and solidarity. Wojciech Knieć and Wojciech Goszczyński⁷⁹ emphasised yet another aspect of the strength of social ties. They investigated rural municipalities in northern Poland that varied regarding the importance of agriculture and geographic location. The authors identified exceptional diversity in communities and their internal governance processes. The operations of former state agricultural holdings⁸⁰ (maximised use

76 Gorlach / Nowak 2010, p. 158.

77 Centralny Ośrodek Informacji Gospodarczej 2024.

78 Ibidem.

79 Knieć / Goszczyński 2022, p. 46.

80 State agricultural holdings (Państwowe Gospodarstwa Rolne, PGR) were large-area state-controlled holdings established in 1949. Their objective was to increase the output of plant and animal products for urban consumption and advocate the superiority of state and social agricultural holdings over private farms. Their land resources grew at the expense of peasants and by taking over the land of other governmental departments. There were many state agricultural holdings in western and northern Poland. Despite preferential treatment regarding funding and resource allocation, their production outputs were below par, and many operated at a loss. Nevertheless, they still received politically motivated state support in the 1960s and 1970s (important commodities for investment projects, feeds, and funds). In 1980, the holdings possessed about 3.5 million hectares of agricultural land. The privatisation of

of scarce resources through social mobilisation), their deep cultural rooting, and the efforts of rural leaders led to the implementation and then maintenance of good governance mechanisms even in objectively difficult conditions. The authors argue that local community cohesion is not so much dependent on location, financial status, or demographic structure. Instead, it is rooted in history (both recent and long gone), cultural identity, traditions, leadership, and the network of social relationships. In summary, even though the objective social conditions were not conducive to good governance processes in the municipalities Knieć and Goszczyński investigated, successful governance and activation of the communities are possible thanks to ingrained values.

Maria Halamska⁸¹ reached similar conclusions. Social changes she investigated come in regional flavours. Their rhythm and nature are not resistant to their history or location in historical regions (mainly overlapping with borders of the eighteenth-century Partitions). Agrarianism and disagrarianism in specific regions or regional versions of agricultural dualism are just a few examples. But there is also a third level, which affects the rhythm and even the direction of changes: the place of the village on the centre-periphery scale, where the centres are cities of various sizes. The importance of this factor has increased substantially over the two decades under study. The Polish countryside is becoming increasingly heterogeneous, making it harder for sociologists and other scholars to define the subject matter of their research.

The current demographic trends are another factor shaping the future of the Polish countryside. The share of the rural population in the total Polish population between the National Census of 2002 and the National Population and Housing Census of 2021 grew from 38.5% to 40.1%. Population changes are very diversified. Most Polish municipalities (about two-thirds) suffer from population loss due to a negative rate of natural increase and negative net migration. However, the population increase in the other one-third of the municipalities is high enough for the rural population to grow in aggregate.⁸²

Also, according to a report by the Foundation for the Development of Polish Agriculture FDPA, the official Polish rural population has grown by 2.5% over the last two decades. It is partially due to the urban migration of people seeking a better quality of life. Still, the statistics do not take the full picture of migration into account. Many farmers migrated abroad for economic reasons without deregistering with local authorities. Demographic data show that the population change is positive in one-third of municipalities in Poland and negative in two-

PGRs started in the 1990s. The process has led to colossal social problems when thousands of former workers were dismissed, source: The PWN Encyclopaedia.

81 Halamska 2011.

82 Stanny / Rosner 2024, pp. 366–367.

thirds, but there are also other differences across regions. The Polish countryside is steadily ageing. In 2022, 19.8% of the population were in the post-working age group. In contrast, it was 15.5% in 2004. At the same time, the pre-working age (0–17) population is declining at an alarming rate. The trend is found in other European countries as well. The rural employment rate has increased by 3% over the last two decades. However, at 59.4%, it remains lower than in cities. Yet, the income of rural residents today is 3.5 times higher than in 2004. The income structure has also improved: more money comes from work and less from welfare benefits.⁸³

High population increase is observed mainly in periurban municipalities of voivodeship capitals. Urban dormitories attract new residents, and the pace of ageing is slower there than in cities. More agrarian areas further away from cities suffer from the most severe population ageing and depopulation. Note that in municipalities experiencing population decline, the problem of the aging population is particularly acute. Better quality of life leads to longer life expectancy, especially among women. This poses numerous challenges for social policy in ensuring an adequate level of services in rural areas. Demographic changes are followed by profound social changes. The most impactful are the emergence of a new family model with one or two children, higher age at first birth, greater percentage of children born out of wedlock, more divorces, fewer marriages, more focus on children's education and skillset, etc.⁸⁴

Another factor of rural development in Poland is the diversified level of entrepreneurship, which means it has to be promoted in areas identified as less entrepreneurial. A spatial analysis of entrepreneurship identified several patterns of business clustering in rural areas. No external funds will stimulate the supply side in municipalities considered poor investment sites where depopulation and economic stagnation are rooted, causing low entrepreneurial potential. Growth in entrepreneurship correlates with supply-side effects. Therefore, any changes in this regard occur only in municipalities where the conditions are conducive to entrepreneurship. These are municipalities near large cities. Note that any services in rural areas are addressed to local residents. A low population density in municipalities under depopulation causes low service demand. Investors do not find such municipalities worth their attention.⁸⁵ A larger population with a demographic potential (at least 300 people, about 100 households) is believed to justify maintaining a basic economy sector and creating a public space.⁸⁶

83 Polish countryside 2024. Report on the state of the countryside 2024.

84 Stanny / Rosner 2024, pp. 366–367.

85 Zarębski 2024, pp. 383–390.

86 Heffner / Twardzik 2022, p. 432.

1.3.3 Potential future development of the Polish countryside

The future development of European rural areas is forecast based mainly on the following research programmes: ESPON, SCENAR 2020, Eururalis, SENSOR, PRELUDE, etc., by international teams. The analysis of future changes in European rural areas by 2030 at the regional scale (NUTS 2) covered such processes as depopulation and population ageing, urbanisations, European Union expansion, globalisation of production and trade, climate change, land use change, and technological advances. The outcomes were then compiled into four scenarios: Global Economy, Continental Markets, Global Cooperation, and Regional Communities. Experts believe technology to be the most influential factor shaping the probable development trajectories. They all pointed out technological improvements beneficial to the countryside. On the other hand, sociodemographic factors will probably hamper rural development.⁸⁷

Both theorists and practitioners in rural areas have been pressing the relevance of the European (and Polish) village model for preserving natural heritage and social cohesion for over 40 years. The image of the Polish countryside 2025 proposed by Urszula Budzich-Szukała in 2005 proved to be somewhat overoptimistic. The author assumed that 'People managed (...) to preserve the traditional architectural layout and align new buildings to it. The environment is clean, and the surroundings of homes and public spaces are kept neat and tidy. All this was achieved essentially by the residents themselves, at a low cost, using locally sourced materials and energy-efficient technologies. The emigration of young, well-educated people has been curbed, and they now see professional opportunities and chances to pursue their ambitions in the countryside.'⁸⁸ Regrettably, despite the author's expectations, rural schools do not always have all the materials they need, and highly motivated teachers are a rarity. Her other visions were more accurate. Agritourism is thriving, and the culinary landscape is inspired by local recipes shared within farm wives associations and based on organic products, at least when local events and occasions are concerned.⁸⁹ As predicted by Jan Krzysztof Ardanowski,⁹⁰ the 2025 countryside will be a much better place to live than the city. Of course, relatively regarding specific indicators. One of the critical factors is the growing rural population: 39.2% of the total population in 2010 and 40.5% in 2023.⁹¹ These forecasts were further validated by Eugeniusz Niedzielski,⁹² who 20 years ago anticipated that people would choose

87 Bański 2017.

88 Budzich-Szukała 2005, p. 45.

89 Ibidem, p. 46.

90 Ardanowski 2005, pp. 54–55.

91 Statistics Poland(c) 2023.

92 Niedzielski 2005, pp. 99–100.

to live in the countryside rather than be forced by 'being tied to the land'. Choice is a sign of freedom and means people can improve their living conditions (well-being). This means the quality of life of long-term and new migrant residents can be elevated. The latter feel encouraged to settle in the countryside because of general rural attributes such as the ability to commune with nature, tranquillity, clean air, physical activities, and so on. Still, these optimistic scenarios must be contrasted by the degradation of the assets of the Polish countryside through repercussions of urbanisation as cities encroach on rural areas. This means:

- disproportionate increase in non-agricultural and forest land and developments;
- greater land consumption dynamics compared to population density;
- inefficient demand for new land incommensurate with the requirements;
- dissemination of spatial planning patterns that promote land use for residential, office, service, industry, and tourism purposes;
- use of agricultural, forest, and ecological land for commercial purposes in well-connected rural areas.

These phenomena pose serious threats to the sustainable development policy.⁹³

The condition of hard infrastructure affects the quality of life. The forecasts from two decades ago depicted the 2025 Polish countryside with complete hard infrastructure because already back then, 89.5% of rural dwellings had running water and over 76%, a bathroom.⁹⁴

It would also provide jobs. However, one should keep in mind that agriculture will offer fewer and fewer jobs. This, in turn, will encourage the creation of new jobs through self-employment and the development of the SME sector in rural areas, with the prevalence of services. Experts also envisaged more non-agricultural operations in holdings, such as produce processing, agritourism, handicrafts, etc. Rural populations would be able to work remotely or engage in e-business. New domains of on-site activities were projected, such as garden design and maintenance, at-home medical care for older people, household assistance, etc.⁹⁵

One of the fundamental goals of modern regional socioeconomic development is to make use of diversity and leverage specific competitive advantages. The crux of this endeavour is to employ cultural identity smartly, promote the importance and value of regional and local products, cultivate characteristic components of landscape architecture, and use the social and economic potential

93 Heffner / Twardzik 2022.

94 Pięcek 2005, p. 333.

95 Niedzielski 2005, p. 100.

and natural resources.⁹⁶ All regions have areas whose characteristics derive from the links to and availability of large cities, natural environment quality, and specific economic and sociocultural functions. The mosaic-like features of rural areas emerge primarily from the properties of subregions (local homelands), which will make much better use of their developmental potential than today. These processes will improve the attractiveness of rural areas.⁹⁷ The concept of a smart village, which must not be limited by conditions offered by technological advancement but should be more open instead, particularly in terms of social innovation, also enhances this attractiveness. Innovation is not only about unique solutions but also about adjusting the existing ones to new social contexts of ageing populations or rural depopulation, for example.⁹⁸

Better access to soft and hard infrastructure is a developmental challenge for the Polish countryside. The appeal of rural areas emanates from nature, tranquillity, and freedom. On the other hand, residents expect amenities that ensure the optimum quality of life. Therefore, people choose a place to live based on natural features (forest, waterbodies, enchanting landscape, etc.), cultural qualities (such as the appearance and architecture of the village, customs, interesting heritage sites), and technical aspects (high-quality hard and soft infrastructure, shops, essential services, etc.).

Transport links with the nearest urban area are critical in the countryside. One possible approach is to expand and improve pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure. Investment in new or upgraded transport links to provide connections with the existing high-frequency railway network can contribute to rural revitalisation in Poland.⁹⁹ Still, this idea may interest primarily young people.

Improved connectivity and remote work will expand the range of residential areas well beyond the periurban zone. Rural areas face serious challenges in the globalised world because the job pool in traditional rural sectors is dwindling. At the same time, information and communication technologies and more flexible job descriptions allow the rural community to participate in the knowledge economy remotely. The number of people who usually or sometimes worked from home reached 2,583 thousand in 2023, 14.9% of all employees. Remote work (the place where the work is performed is not considered here) was performed usually or sometimes by 1,508 thousand people or 8.7% of the workforce.¹⁰⁰

Although agriculture will remain an essential part of the economy, most household income will come from other sectors (services, construction, power engineering) or businesses related to agricultural production (food processing,

96 Knapik / Król 2023.

97 Bański 2017.

98 Komorowski / Stanny 2020.

99 Nieto / Gascón 2024.

100 Statistics Poland 2024.

agritourism, protection of the natural environment and cultural heritage). The current processes clearly indicate an increase in social awareness and entrepreneurship among the rural population. Small enterprises offering services and food processing are particularly important for rural development. Family holdings should seek appropriate organisational forms to ensure competitiveness in their respective markets, especially in the food sector, thereby guaranteeing sales profits. Success is only really possible if a large group of farmers commit to these efforts.¹⁰¹ Venturing a glimpse further into the future, the Polish countryside probably will not be much different in 40 years, but it will be more diversified, active, and attractive.¹⁰²

According to Izabella Bukraba-Rylska,¹⁰³ one should no longer think possible such changes in the Polish countryside that would lead to deruralisation, disagrarisation, or eradication of the traditional Polish village.

1.3.4 Summary

There is no single 'average' Polish countryside. It is diverse because of its history, culture, geographic location, and other factors. One can identify several types of the village:

1. a village similar to the traditional one (far from large cities, not urbanised);
2. a slightly urbanised village (close to large cities, with partially preserved traditional and modern qualities);
3. a completely urbanised village (close to large cities, 'aspiring' to cityhood and purposefully and effectively discarding its rural qualities);
4. a village as a rural community, a place purposefully chosen where people integrate into the local community and adopt its living patterns (at least partially);
5. a village as a continuation of the city/metropolis with a trend duality: establishment of estates/districts on the fringes with all urban ways of life and isolation from the rest of the village in the historical centre (similarly to urban processes). Two trends emerge today. The first is the decline of the first type of village, the traditional one. The other tendency is adopting the urban lifestyle in periurban villages and providing them with soft and hard infrastructure in response to the needs of new residents and project owners.

When considering the last type of village, there are certain parallels to be drawn with the city-growing mechanism described by the founding fathers of the Chicago School in the twentieth century. Village centres are not appealing to newcomers. They are inhabited by the native population, which is relatively

101 Bański 2017.

102 Bański 2013, p. 115.

103 Bukraba-Rylska 2009.

cohesive but unwelcoming towards new estates and their residents. Migrant residents do not even attempt to settle there, as it would be inconsistent with their life plans: to choose an attractive place to live (the outskirts are a more desirable location) rather than to integrate into the local community. The nature of the Polish countryside is determined by the degree of urbanisation, geographic location, share of income from agriculture (how much agrarian it is), culture, and religion.¹⁰⁴

Just as likely, the multifunctional development of the Polish countryside may continue, aided by:

- the absence of negative demographic trends that always lead to the degradation of rural settlements and adverse economic effects;
- diversified functional structure of rural areas (functional versatility) without domination by the agricultural function and lower impact of the residential function;¹⁰⁵
- no dispersion of rural infrastructure, which facilitates social integration and ensures access to the village;
- better transport accessibility.¹⁰⁶

In summary, apart from the economy, sustainable rural development requires spatial chaos and greater attention to:

- the water environment (water buffering in natural floodplains and wetlands and in artificial reservoirs to reduce water pollution);
- air (curbing greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture through technological change and shift to renewable energy sources);
- soil (increased absorption of carbon and organic matter);
- biodiversity (preventing its reduction);
- rural landscape (preserving its value).¹⁰⁷

The insights presented in this chapter suggest specific trends which can guide rural development in the coming twenty years. Some analogies can be employed to venture to outline a picture of the Polish countryside in the decades to come. A more comprehensive development vision with strengths and weaknesses of the potential of the Polish countryside is provided in the closing part of the monograph.

104 Knapik 2016.

105 Bański 2017.

106 Heffner / Twardzik 2022, p. 432.

107 Zegar 2020, p. 58.

Chapter II.

Level and standards of living in the countryside identified in the study

2.1 Methodology of self study

The authors spent several months developing the research tool for the study, the interview questionnaire. It has been verified by sociologists from the University of Łódź. The Rector's Research Ethics Committee for Human Research of the University of Agriculture in Kraków has approved the project.

The study aimed to diagnose the state of the Polish rural society 20 years into Poland's EU membership. The findings allowed the authors to attempt to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the rural community. This approach provides foundations for building development scenarios based on enhancing the available potential and reducing developmental barriers. Four primary research problems have been addressed:

1. To what degree does the quality of living in the countryside satisfy the needs and expectations of the rural community?
2. What is the level of social capital identified as social networks, norms, and values?
3. What are the priority values for the Polish countryside?
4. To what degree are rural residents interested in engaging in non-agricultural activities fostering multifunctional development?

The following metrics were used to quantify the research problems:

Re 1. Quality of living in the countryside:

- distance from the place of living to the nearest town/city;
- household's financial standing;
- level of satisfaction with the living standards in the household;
- level of satisfaction with the place of living;
- level of satisfaction with the available services, soft and hard infrastructure, and other factors affecting quality of life;
- type of Internet access;

- occurrence of situations detrimental to the quality of life;
- plans to potentially move home;
- residents' empowerment regarding their development and the development of the municipality.

Re 2. Level of social capital identified as social networks, norms, and values:

- having friends;
- feelings of loneliness;
- respect from other rural residents;
- trust in other people;
- principal life values;
- maintaining direct relationships with family members, friends, neighbours, and rural residents;
- affiliation with Internet groups;
- cooperation, sharing, engagement in the village's life;
- trust in public institutions and figures.

Re 3. Priority values of the Polish rural population:

- being a farmer;
- degree of religiosity of the residents;
- emotional bonds with the village;
- perception of rural residents regarding their faith, beliefs, political views, openness to change, and family model preferences.

Re 4. The level of rural residents interesting and engaging in non-agricultural activities fostering multifunctional development

- engagement in diverse non-agricultural activities among rural residents;
- interest in non-agricultural activities among family members.

The survey was administered by Grupa Badawcza DSC Sp. z o.o. It was funded under a research project.¹⁰⁸ The survey was conducted in March 2024. DSC legally acquired databases to build a sufficiently sizeable quantitative frame. The survey research company made every effort to guarantee appropriate security measures to protect personal data against unauthorised processing, access, disclosure, or use by deploying appropriate security protocols for the project. DSC has confirmed compliance with proper security policies with a PN-ISO/IEC 27001 cer-

108 Co-financed by the Minister of Science under the 'Regional Initiative of Excellence' programme. Agreement No. RID/SP/0039/2024/01. Subsidised amount PLN 6,187,000.00. Project period 2024–2027.

tificate from 2017. Its GDPR-based security policy facilitates reliable and objective statistical analyses using anonymised data.¹⁰⁹

All interviews followed the CATI technique. The process was supported by the SURneo software. The respondents answered the questions individually and were guided by the software. They could not proceed to the next question if they left the previous one unanswered, if they selected more responses than required, or if their responses were mutually exclusive. Thus, the data collection process was controlled. Once all the questions were answered, the data were sent to the database and coded, so that the researcher did not have to categorise the answers before analysis. The data were ready for analysis and inference. This contributed to the reliability of the survey by preventing manual data coding mistakes.

The sample consisted of 1,600 adults from rural municipalities in Poland. Considering the population size of 8,522,736 people (according to the 2021 National Census) and the desired maximum sampling error for a voivodeship not exceeding the statistical error of $\pm 2.5\%$, the survey involved a representative sample of $N=1600$. Sampling was random within the stratum of residents of rural municipalities.

The qualitative research presented in this Chapter IV is intended to complement the quantitative approach discussed earlier. A total of eight in-depth interviews were conducted to gain insight into aspects relevant to the community level of living, the attractiveness of the countryside as a place to live and work in terms of the needs and expectations of diverse social groups, perspectives of social development, and opportunities for creating new jobs in rural areas. Such attributes as social activity, entrepreneurship, and innovation were highly relevant to the research perspective as signs of grassroots engagement of rural communities. Local action groups stimulate and support local communities in developing social capital by design, combining three sectors (social, public, and economic). Rural areas in Poland vary in terms of history, culture, society, and economy, all of which may affect how the available social capital is used. Another role of local action groups is to distribute funds among associations and other rural actors. The knowledge and experience of local action group stakeholders allow them to identify diverse aspects of grassroots activity and to motivate local communities. The purposefully selected sample included six people in charge of local action group networks, an association, and a distinct, independent local action group, which makes eight people in total. The respondents representative eight areas of Poland: Lesser Poland, Lower Silesia, Western Pomerania, Pomerania, Warmia and Masuria, Central Poland, Greater Poland, and Polish Subcarpathia.

109 Respondent data is not shared with clients because every survey by DSC was anonymous, as explained to the respondents.

The interview guide comprises 22 questions categorised into 1. Rural standards of living; 2. Countryside for the young and the old; 3. Rural social capital; 4. Future of the countryside, a 10-year horizon. The respondents consented to have their answers recorded. The recordings were then transcribed. The results are presented in Chapter IV.

2.2 Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample

The sex distribution of the sample reflects the sex structure of the Polish population. Women slightly dominate the sample (50.6%). Most of the respondents (55.2%) are older than 45. The remaining 44.8% are young and middle-aged, from 18 to 44. The age-sex structure of the sample is discussed below. Most age groups are dominated by men (about 3% more men than women). Women form the majority in the youngest age cohort, from 18 to 24 years, and in the oldest group of 60 and over (more than 2% more women than men). The largest group of respondents (43.8%) had a university degree. About 39.8% of the sample had secondary education. Vocational education was reported by 12.7% of the respondents. Most of the interviewed people were married (70.7%). Unmarried individuals were the second-largest group (19.3%).

Table 1 summarises the sociodemographic profile of the sample in terms of sex, age, education, and marital status.

Table 1. Sociodemographic profile of the sample

| | Variables | % |
|-----------|----------------|------|
| Sex | female | 50.6 |
| | male | 49.4 |
| Age | 18–24 | 8.4 |
| | 25–34 | 16.1 |
| | 35–44 | 20.3 |
| | 45–59 | 25.1 |
| | 60 and older | 30.1 |
| Education | primary | 1.7 |
| | vocational | 12.7 |
| | secondary | 39.8 |
| | post-secondary | 1.9 |
| | higher | 43.8 |

(Continued)

| Variables | | % |
|----------------|-----------|------|
| Marital status | unmarried | 19.3 |
| | married | 70.7 |
| | divorced | 4.6 |
| | widowed | 5.4 |

2.3 Family, social, and employment situation of the respondents

According to the data in Table 2, 8.2% of the population lived alone. The largest group were households of four (26.0%). A slightly smaller proportion were households with two people (24.4%). Three-person families constituted a similar group (22.3%). ‘Five and more’ was selected by 19.0% of the respondents.

Table 2. Household size by age group [%]

| Household size | Age group (years) | | | | | |
|------------------|-------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| | 18–24 | 25–34 | 35–44 | 45–59 | 60+ | Total |
| Single adult | 0.8 | 5.9 | 5.7 | 6.3 | 15.7 | 8.2 |
| 2 people | 16.9 | 13.7 | 6.6 | 20.8 | 50.6 | 24.4 |
| 3 people | 40.8 | 31.4 | 17.7 | 20.8 | 16.6 | 22.3 |
| 4 people | 27.7 | 30.2 | 41.3 | 29.8 | 7.3 | 26.0 |
| 5 or more people | 13.8 | 18.8 | 28.8 | 22.3 | 9.8 | 19.0 |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

Less than half of the respondents (688 people, 43.0% of the sample) declared minor children (up to 18 years) living in the same household. Most of these (73.5%) reported children aged 6 to 18. The second-largest group (28.9%) comprised people living with younger children aged 3 to 6. The last group with children below 3 years of age constituted 20.6% (Tab. 3). The information is relevant for several reasons. First, a significant proportion of the respondents had children who lived with their parents as minors. Second, the age structure of the children suggests specific needs for soft and hard rural infrastructure. Third, the declared subjective level of living reflects the extent to which the needs of the youngest rural residents are being met, which may affect plans regarding living in the countryside. The authors discuss these aspects further in the monograph.

Table 3. Age structure of respondents' children [%]

| Age group of respondents' children | |
|------------------------------------|-------|
| Under 3 years | 20.6 |
| 3 to 6 years | 28.9 |
| 6 to 18 years | 73.5 |
| Total | 123.1 |

Note: 1. Only those respondents who declared living with minors are included (688/43%).
2. Multiple-answer question. The total is higher than 100% because respondents could select more than one answer.

According to the National Census, the number of families in rural areas increased by slightly over 11,000 (0.3%). The increase in rural families compared to urban families found in the latest census (2021) is due to the increasing urban-to-rural migration, typically into suburban municipalities near cities. The number of married couples without children grew significantly by 373,500 (13.9%) between 2011 and 2021. There were 3,069,900 of them in 2021. The increase was primarily in the countryside (23% vs 9.2% in cities). The average household size in Poland was 3.14 in 2011 and 2.99 in 2021. In both years, the average household size in rural areas was higher than in cities and in the country as a whole. In 2011, it was 3.92 in the countryside and 2.79 in cities. The average rural household consisted of 3.71 people in 2021. In cities, it was 2.65 people.¹¹⁰

The dominant group in the present survey was the household of four (26.0%), which is consistent with the National Census.

Most of the respondents (70.7%) were married. A group of 10.4% declared non-marital cohabitation, mainly those divorced (38.4%) and unmarried (44.3%). A significant proportion were not in a relationship (17.7%), approximately an equal part of singles and divorcees (Tab. 4).

Table 4. Type of relationship with a partner vs marital status of the respondents [%]

| Type of relationship with a partner | Marital status | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|----------------|---------|----------|---------|-------|
| | Un-married | Married | Divorced | Widowed | Total |
| Formal (marriage) | 0.0 | 100.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 70.7 |
| Cohabitation | 44.3 | 0.0 | 38.4 | 1.2 | 10.4 |
| No relationship | 51.5 | 0.0 | 56.2 | 95.3 | 17.7 |
| Refused | 4.2 | 0.0 | 5.5 | 3.5 | 1.3 |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

110 Statistics Poland(a) 2023.

According to National Census data, the share of married couples (with or without children) in 2011 was 74.3%. Cohabitation (with or without children) applied to 2.9%. The same metrics for urban areas were 71.9% and 3.7%, respectively. In rural areas, the corresponding figures were 78.2% and 1.6%. In 2021, 72.0% of the population were married couples (with or without children). Cohabitation (with or without children) was chosen by 5.4%. The same metrics for urban areas were 69.4% and 6.7%, respectively. They amounted to 75.7% and 3.8% in the countryside, respectively.¹¹¹ The share of marriages in Poland fell by 2.3 pp over a decade. Cohabitation grew by 2.5 pp. The data show that the city and the countryside had similar shares of marriages and cohabitation from 2011 to 2021.

The survey results and the 2021 National Census show similar values regarding marriage (70.7% and 75.7%, respectively). However, there is a significant difference in reported cohabitation (10.4% vs 3.8%).

Distance to a town or city significantly affects rural quality of life in all age groups, from children and youth (school commute) to adults and older people. Access to soft infrastructure, stores, and services is critical to older people. The average distance to the nearest town or city reported by 20.3% was 5 km. The results did not deviate much from the averages for individual voivodeships. The share was higher only in Lubuskie Voivodeship, 31.7%. The same voivodeship was also the one in which the largest distance interval was indicated by the highest proportion of respondents – 18.3% (Tab. 5).

The voivodeship is located in western Poland, bordering Germany. As on 31 December 2022, 26.4% of its population were older than 60.¹¹²

Table 5. Distance from the village of residence to the nearest town/city by voivodeship [%]

| Voivodeship | Distance from the village of residence to the nearest town/city by voivodeship | | | | |
|--------------------|--|-----------------|------------------|------------|-------|
| | Up to 5 km | From 5 to 10 km | From 10 to 20 km | Over 20 km | Total |
| Dolnośląskie | 20.8 | 45.8 | 22.9 | 10.4 | 100.0 |
| Kujawsko-pomorskie | 16.7 | 34.5 | 36.9 | 11.9 | 100.0 |
| Lubelskie | 13.3 | 40.0 | 40.0 | 6.7 | 100.0 |
| Lubuskie | 31.7 | 20.0 | 30.0 | 18.3 | 100.0 |
| Łódzkie | 23.2 | 36.8 | 36.8 | 3.2 | 100.0 |
| Małopolskie | 22.8 | 35.0 | 32.2 | 10.0 | 100.0 |
| Mazowieckie | 24.5 | 25.0 | 40.6 | 9.9 | 100.0 |
| Opolskie | 23.9 | 39.1 | 28.3 | 8.7 | 100.0 |

111 Ibidem.

112 <https://www.money.pl/emerytury/oskar-sobolewski/najstarszy-region-w-polsce-tam-zyje-najwiecej-seniorow-6988910293208000a.html>.

(Continued)

| Voivodeship | Distance from the village of residence to the nearest town/city by voivodeship | | | | |
|---------------------|--|-----------------|------------------|------------|-------|
| | Up to 5 km | From 5 to 10 km | From 10 to 20 km | Over 20 km | Total |
| Podlaskie | 18.2 | 32.5 | 40.3 | 9.1 | 100.0 |
| Podkarpackie | 22.4 | 34.7 | 34.7 | 8.2 | 100.0 |
| Pomorskie | 18.3 | 34.9 | 35.8 | 11.0 | 100.0 |
| Śląskie | 21.4 | 35.0 | 32.5 | 11.1 | 100.0 |
| Świętokrzyskie | 17.7 | 48.4 | 24.2 | 9.7 | 100.0 |
| Warmińsko-mazurskie | 12.3 | 30.1 | 50.7 | 6.8 | 100.0 |
| Wielkopolskie | 19.8 | 46.6 | 26.7 | 6.9 | 100.0 |
| Zachodniopomorskie | 16.3 | 18.6 | 51.2 | 14.0 | 100.0 |
| Total | 20.3 | 35.1 | 35.2 | 9.4 | 100.0 |

As mentioned above, the distance from the village of residence to the nearest town/city is critical for the standard of living. Unrestricted access to stores, health centres, pharmacies, nursery schools, and schools is the everyday norm for urban populations. For rural residents, the access is sometimes limited. The matter is discussed in more detail further in the monograph. According to the survey, more than one-third of the respondents indicated a distance interval from 5 to 10 kilometres, and nearly the same number reported a distance from 10 to 20 kilometres. This totals to 70.3%. It is a significant number, considering that a substantial part of them live alone (Tab. 6).

Table 6. Distance from the village of residence to the nearest town/city by household size [%]

| Distance from the village of residence to the nearest town/city by voivodeship | Household size | | | | | Total |
|--|----------------|----------|----------|----------|-------------------|-------|
| | Single person | 2 people | 3 people | 4 people | 5 people and more | |
| up to 5 km | 23.7 | 20.7 | 19.3 | 19.9 | 20.9 | 20.4 |
| from 5 to 10 km | 35.1 | 35.9 | 37.1 | 36.3 | 30.1 | 35.1 |
| from 10 to 20 km | 31.3 | 35.1 | 35.1 | 36.1 | 36.1 | 35.2 |
| over 20 km | 9.9 | 8.3 | 8.5 | 7.7 | 12.9 | 9.2 |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

According to a comparative study on access to soft infrastructure in rural and urban areas in Poland,¹¹³ the number of elements of this type of infrastructure decreased between 2010 and 2020. The only increases in soft infrastructure be-

113 Statistics Poland(b) 2022.

tween 2010 and 2020 were in nursery schools (0.9%), health centres (10.5%), pharmacies (6.4%), and tourist accommodation (61.8%) (Tab. 7). The latter demonstrates the substantial development potential of the Polish countryside: multifunctional rural development towards diversification of income sources for the rural community and growth of tourism services.

Table 7. Selected components of soft infrastructure in 2010 and 2020 [count]

| Soft infrastructure | 2010 | 2020 |
|--|--------|--------|
| Nursery schools | 10,684 | 10,776 |
| Primary schools for children and youth | 9,202 | 8,199 |
| Public libraries | 5,512 | 5,059 |
| Health centres | 4,190 | 4,630 |
| Doctor surgeries | 1,697 | 1,071 |
| Pharmacies | 1,835 | 1,952 |
| Tourist accommodation | 2,902 | 4,697 |

Source: original work based on: Rural Areas in Poland in 2020, Statistics Poland, Statistics Poland – Olsztyn Branch, Warsaw, Olsztyn 2022.

Table 8 summarises two variables: marital status and age of the respondents. Unmarried respondents make up 19.3% of the sample. The vast majority of the sample were married (70.7%).

Table 8. Marital status vs age [%]

| Marital status | Age group (years) | | | | | Total |
|----------------|-------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| | 18–24 | 25–34 | 35–44 | 45–59 | 60+ | |
| Unmarried | 80.0 | 38.3 | 15.5 | 8.5 | 3.4 | 19.3 |
| Married | 20.0 | 60.5 | 79.7 | 79.6 | 75.9 | 70.7 |
| Divorced | 0.0 | 1.2 | 4.5 | 8.7 | 4.1 | 4.6 |
| Widowed | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.3 | 3.2 | 16.5 | 5.4 |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

General Polish statistics reveal significant changes in the age structure at first marriage in recent years. The share of (very) young newlyweds declined, while first marriage after the age of 25, and particularly after the age of 30, grew more popular. The largest share of men (71.2%) were 25–39 at first marriage in 2022. For women, the dominant interval was 20–34.¹¹⁴

The other investigated aspect is population ageing. Old age combined with solitude is a tremendous social problem, especially in the countryside. Nearly 30% of the total population have no permanent partners. Most of them are

114 Demography of Poland 2024.

unmarried singles. Lonely older people over 60 amount to 8.2%. Being unmarried does not necessarily mean living without a family member. Therefore, solitude does not have to entail loneliness when no support and help from household members can be expected.

Let us compare the data from the National Censuses for 2011 and 2021. In 2011, the population aged 65 and over stood at 5,230,152 people (16% of the total population), including:

- unmarried people, who made up 0,6% of the total population, including:
 - in cities, 0,7% of the total urban population
 - in the countryside, 0,6% of the total rural population
- widowed and divorced people, who accounted for 7.3% of the total population, including:
 - in cities, 7.4% of the total urban population
 - in the countryside, 7.2% of the total rural population.

Therefore, 7.8% of the total rural population belonged to one of the three groups in 2011.

In 2021, the population aged 65 and over was 7,088,437 people (22.1% of the total population), including:

- unmarried people, who made up 1% of the total population, including:
 - in cities, 1.1% of the total urban population
 - in the countryside, 0.9% of the total rural population
- widowed and divorced people, who accounted for 8.3% of the total population, including:
 - in cities, 9.0% of the total urban population
 - in the countryside, 7.2% of the total rural population.¹¹⁵

Therefore, 8.1% of the total rural population belonged to one of the three groups in 2021, which is a slight increase of 0.3 pp. Over the same period, the urban population living alone grew by 2 pp.

The following research problem concerning rural population characteristics is their links to the place of living. The survey identified similar shares of married respondents living in the countryside who came from the countryside and those who moved there from urban areas (69.7% and 74.0%, respectively). In the unmarried group, the proportion of respondents who have always lived in the countryside is much smaller (by 8.2 pp). The share in the widowed group is similar. The situation is quite different for the divorced: 3.8% of them are native rural residents living in the countryside, and 7.3% have migrated from a city (Tab. 9). It is typical of the young Polish rural population. Despite the increasing

115 Statistics Poland 2023.

attractiveness of rural areas as a place to live, older cohorts are more interested in moving to the countryside. Young people with employment links to the town or city move to the countryside primarily if it is relatively close to their place of work.¹¹⁶

Table 9. Marital status vs place of living and origin of the respondents [%]

| Marital status | Origin | | |
|----------------|-----------------------|------------------------|-------|
| | Native rural resident | Urban-to-rural migrant | Total |
| Unmarried | 21.2 | 13.0 | 19.3 |
| Married | 69.7 | 74.0 | 70.7 |
| Divorced | 3.8 | 7.3 | 4.6 |
| Widowed | 5.3 | 5.6 | 5.4 |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

A vast majority of the respondents (71.4%) work. Table 10 presents data for this part of the population only. It compares residents in terms of occupation type. Nearly one-third of the respondents are freelancers. The second-largest group are farmers (17.0%). One more group exceeded the 10% threshold: specialists with a university degree. Three groups had about 9%: office administration employees, services employees, and managerial staff. Skilled labour and mid-level personnel, technicians, amounted to about 5% each.

Table 10. Classification of respondent occupation types as a percentage [%]

| Occupation type | |
|--------------------------------------|-------|
| Managerial staff | 8.6 |
| Specialists with a university degree | 11.8 |
| Mid-level personnel, technicians | 4.8 |
| Office administration employees | 9.8 |
| Service employees | 9.2 |
| Skilled labour | 5.0 |
| Unskilled labour | 0.8 |
| Farmers | 17.0 |
| Freelancers | 32.1 |
| Refused | 0.9 |
| Total | 100.0 |

Note: only the working portion of the population is presented in the table (1142 people, 71.4%). Persons dependent only on other sources of income are excluded.

116 Halamska/ Kłodziński / Stanny 2023.

The authors of this publication examine the extent to which the Polish countryside is still traditional, which in the context of employment means being a farmer. This occupation was reported by 17.0% of the respondents.

According to general Polish statistics,¹¹⁷ the number of people working in the agricultural industry was declining between 2010 and 2021:

- 2010: 2,326,200 people;
- 2015: 2,331,200 people;
- 2019: 2,320,400 people;
- 2020: 1,086,000 people;
- 2021: 1,084,400 people.

The overall rural population grew by 766 thousand between 2000 and 2019.

The process has been inconsequential for the number of farmers. It is primarily a result of urban-to-rural migration. Nearly seven in ten rural residents worked outside the agricultural sector. In Poland, about 10% worked in agriculture compared to less than 3% in the EU. In the mid-1990s, Polish agriculture employed as many as 3.5 million Poles, which is 22% of the working population. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the population of agricultural workers declined to 2.5 million and then shrank further to 1.5 million in 2017. The share of the population working in agriculture was 9.7% in 2020. At the end of 2020, farm workers increased by 100,000. According to the Polish LFS¹¹⁸, the agricultural workforce increased by 91,000. Agricultural Social Insurance Fund¹¹⁹ data show a decrease of 27,000 insured persons. Without tax data, it is impossible to tell how much this disparity is due to legal employment schemes and what part is due to grey market employment.¹²⁰

A vast majority of the respondents (1,142, 71.4%) work. The others (458, 28.6%) rely on other income sources. Retired people make up the largest group (75.7% of the total population dependent on other sources of income). They are followed by homemakers (8.1%) and the unemployed (6.1%) (Tab. 11).

Table 11. Classification of respondent social groups as a percentage [%]

| Social group | |
|-----------------------|------|
| Unemployed | 6.1 |
| Retired | 75.7 |
| Disability pensioners | 5.3 |
| Pupils and students | 2.8 |

117 Agricultural Yearbook 2022.

118 LFS – Labour Force Survey.

119 A government institution operating the social security system for farmers and their families.

120 Miniszewski 2021.

(Continued)

| Social group | |
|----------------------|-------|
| Homemakers and other | 8.1 |
| Refused | 2.0 |
| Total | 100.0 |

Note: only people with sole sources of income other than work are included (458 people, 28.6%).

Nearly half of the retired and disability pensioners used to work in agriculture. About 20% of the unemployed respondents had an agricultural background (Tab. 12).

Table 12. Agricultural background of selected social groups [%]

| Involvement in agricultural production | Social group | | | |
|--|--------------|---------|-----------------------|-------|
| | Unemployed | Retired | Disability pensioners | Total |
| Yes | 21.4 | 45.2 | 50.0 | 43.9 |
| No | 78.6 | 54.8 | 50.0 | 56.1 |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

Note: only three group categories are included (399, 24.9%).

Although non-family farms represented merely 7% of all holdings in the EU in 2020, they held a much larger share in the area of land used for agricultural production (about 39%), total workforce (about 22%), livestock units (about 45%), and standard production (about 44%). Family farms accounted for at least 80% of all holdings in all EU member states except for Estonia (65%) and France (58%). Countries with the highest percentages of family farms are Greece, Romania, and Poland (all with about 99%).¹²¹

In 2020, there were 9.1 million agricultural holdings in the EU. Most (estimated at 93%) could be considered family farms (i.e. farms managed by the family, where the family accounts for 50% or more of the agricultural labour force). Family farms dominate the structure of EU agriculture in terms of the number of holdings, their contribution to agricultural employment and, to a lesser degree, the area of land they cultivate and the value of the production they generate. Almost six in every ten farms (about 57%) were run by the owner and family members only. On a further 36% of farms, family labour accounted for at least 50% of total labour. Family farms accounted for a majority of the utilised agricultural land in 2020 (about 61% of the 157.4 million hectares), most of the

121 Eurostat 2023.

total agricultural labour force (nearly 78%), a majority of the livestock units (almost 55%), and standard output (about 56%).

2.4 Quality of life and subjective well-being. Concepts and theories

Nearly all theoretical descriptions of the concept of quality of life commence with an emphasis on its ambiguity and complexity. It is only reasonable, considering the exceptional popularity of the notion spanning multiple disciplines.¹²² The fact that such diverse disciplines as sociology, economics, human geography, political sciences, psychology, philosophy, and medical sciences (Health-Related Quality of Life, HRQoL) employ the concept further exacerbates the problem. Another factor contributing to the complexity is the term ‘quality’, which, although central to the sciences and humanities, has several competing definitions. Note also that the ‘quantitative’ perception of the criterion as employed in many research perspectives (often resorting to ‘better’ and ‘worse’ quality of life) is, in fact, contrary to its general ‘qualitative’ profile (except for the descriptive dimension of ‘different qualities’). As a result, despite intense interest in this research area, no universal and generally acclaimed definition of quality of life has been proposed to this day.¹²³

Although the first signs of interest in quality of life could be traced back to the philosophical equation of a good life with a virtuous life¹²⁴ or broadly defined happiness, the very term ‘quality of life’ was coined in the twentieth century. One of the first scholars to study quality of life was an Italian sociologist and statistician, Alfredo Niceforo, who sought to apply quantitative methods to social development.¹²⁵ Quality of life was also investigated implicitly by sociologists, for example, in a study on life in the rural USA.¹²⁶ Still, the very term gained significant traction in academia in the 1960s and 1970s in response to a post-war economic boom in Western societies and the concept of wealth it fostered. The quality of life pivot is best reflected in a popular slogan of the time: ‘more well-being rather than more wealth’.¹²⁷ Until the 1970s, quality of life was predominantly regarded from a quantitative perspective. Attempts were made to measure it objectively by linking it to socioeconomic conditions with various dimensions

122 Farquhar 1995, pp. 502–508.

123 Land / Michalos / Sirgy 2012.

124 Veenhoven 2007.

125 Niceforo 1921.

126 Ogburn 1946.

127 Veenhoven 2007, p. 54.

and metrics of satisfaction of individual and collective needs. Most of the research at the time lacked theoretical foundations.¹²⁸

The approach proposed by Angus Campbell is considered groundbreaking for quality of life research. He suggested indicators linked to psychological aspects of human existence, similar to those used in economics. Campbell emphasised that such traditional metrics as income or housing conditions are mere substitutes, sometimes failing to reflect the individual experience of happiness and life satisfaction.¹²⁹ In a project that he and his colleagues started in 1971, quality of life analyses investigated the degree of satisfaction of needs in 15 domains, including family and social relationships, health, work, residence and neighbour relationships, social life, spare time activities, education, living standard, or general standards affecting the quality of life in a local community.¹³⁰ The respondents evaluated satisfaction in each domain with a seven-point scale. This measurement method has provided a benchmark for further studies as it encompasses cognitive and emotional aspects of life. Campbell's analyses revealed that objective living conditions, like income or education, accounted for a small part of the variability in experiencing well-being as it hinges primarily on subjective experiences and social relationships. The conclusions of Campbell's team indicated no direct link between objective parameters of quality of life and a subjective evaluation of satisfaction. Campbell argued that an increase in objective metrics of quality of life does not necessarily translate into subjectively perceived satisfaction, and the opposite is possible.¹³¹

At that time, experts realised that an increase in wealth (measured as income per capita) does not have to stimulate growth in subjective well-being in developed countries. It is known as the Easterlin paradox, named after its author.¹³² The idea is founded on an observation that although wealthier people in all countries enjoy higher levels of life satisfaction than those with lower incomes in all countries, happiness changes only slightly as income increases.¹³³ Therefore, not only do income differences among countries not affect happiness levels, but income increases also fail to promote greater happiness above a certain wealth level. For Easterlin, it meant that happiness depends on relative instead of absolute income,¹³⁴ which some considered an argument that further wealth accumulation has no utilitarian rationale.¹³⁵ Other researchers accounted for the

128 Mularska-Kucharek 2013, pp. 42–43.

129 Campbell 1976.

130 Campbell / Converse / Rodgers 1976.

131 Campbell 1976.

132 Easterlin 1974.

133 Veenhoven 1993.

134 Easterlin 1995.

135 Townsend 1979.

paradox by looking into how income is spent. They referred to the notion of conspicuous consumption,¹³⁶ mainly of positional goods.¹³⁷ Thus, it is the consumption mode rather than the income level that explains the differences. Robert Frank argued that satisfaction caused by conspicuous consumption is much more context-dependent than satisfaction from inconspicuous consumption.¹³⁸

It is therefore important to distinguish between the level of living and quality of life when discussing the well-being of individuals and communities. Despite multiple varying definitions, level of living can be regarded as being associated with satisfying needs, while quality is linked to how the needs are satisfied.¹³⁹ From this point of view, level of living concerns the degree to which basic needs are satisfied. A distinction is drawn here between the needs linked to the proper functioning of a person and those that do not threaten the biological existence if unfulfilled. Notably, both types occur regardless of the individual's will.¹⁴⁰ Therefore, level of living covers a wide range of objective material needs, such as income, job, or housing,¹⁴¹ often also access to education or health care.¹⁴² It is a metric of material and social resources at a person's disposal with which they can address basic needs.

This definition was used in geographical research to monitor regional differences in level of living. The conceptual framework for level of living proposed by Knox focused on objective indicators, such as income, employment, or housing conditions, to evaluate regional differences in well-being.¹⁴³ On the other hand, quality of life is concerned with a more subjective aspect of experienced life satisfaction, focusing on how people perceive the satisfaction of their needs and what values and emotions they attach to the process. An important aspect of this distinction is the assumption that living standards are the basis of quality of life, but by no means determine it. Although material conditions are relevant, it is the subjective perception of the conditions and the ability to pursue personal aspirations and goals that decide the actual quality of life.

The limitations of concentrating on objective factors of quality of life, such as income, inspired scholars to look for more person-centred approaches. Particularly relevant here is the capability approach, which combines elements of development, justice, and well-being. The capability approach was developed by

136 Veblen 1899.

137 Hirsch 1976.

138 Frank 1999 / Frank 2004.

139 Gałęski 1977, pp. 43–45.

140 Zygmunt 2017, p. 219.

141 Dartha / Rogge 2020, p. 1016.

142 The cited OECD categorisations already classify the latter two dimensions as part of quality of life.

143 Knox 1974.

Amartya Sen¹⁴⁴ and then shaped by Martha Nussbaum,¹⁴⁵ Mahbub ul Haq,¹⁴⁶ and many others. The concept was moulded in several areas of philosophy, human development, well-being, and quality of life, as well as justice, inequalities, and human rights. However impossible it is to synthesise all the nuances of the concept, one can try to present its central components. The capability approach is a normative framework, where development, well-being, and justice are defined through an individual's actual abilities to realise the functionings they value. What matters is not only what commodities and resources are at the individual's disposal, but mainly whether they have the capability to lead a life they believe is valuable by realising the functionings they value. Expanding the capability to realise functionings sets is a dimension of social growth. The central notions of the concept are functionings, capabilities, values, and agency.¹⁴⁷

Sen defines functionings as specific aspects of an individual's life that reflect what they actually manage to do or be in life.¹⁴⁸ They include activities or potential states that people consider valuable and that contribute to their overall well-being, such as being healthy, safe, and educated, or having a satisfying job,¹⁴⁹ good relationships, or the desired number of children.¹⁵⁰ Valuable functionings are deliberately selected from among all potential functionings in light of internalised values.

Capabilities refer to a specific set of functionings combinations the individual can choose to realise. Capabilities are not only what the person can actually do (or does). They involve the freedom to choose among a range of functionings, i. e. the freedom to guide one's life in line with chosen values. Therefore, the individual's well-being must not be reduced to the resources they possess. It is the actual freedom to take specific action and pursue particular goals. 'The approach is based on a view of living as a combination of various "doings and beings", with quality of life to be assessed in terms of the capability to achieve valuable functionings.'¹⁵¹ Valued functionings can be various ways of being or doing.

Values refer to those functionings that an individual finds significant and worthwhile. Some are very simple (such as good health or nourishment). Others are more complex, like self-worth, but just as valued because they are generally considered indispensable for a good life. However, although some functionings are valued universally, their importance and prioritisation may vary across the

144 Sen 1980; Sen 1988; Sen 1992; Sen 1999.

145 Nussbaum 1988; Nussbaum 1992; Nussbaum 1997; Nussbaum 2011.

146 Haq 1995.

147 Sen 1993, p. 30.

148 Sen 1993, p. 31; Sen 1999, p. 75.

149 Sen 1993.

150 Fahlen 2013.

151 Sen 1993, p. 31.

population. The value individuals attribute to specific functionings will direct their actions towards particular goals. Sen illustrates this principle with an example of two equally malnourished people. For the first one, it is because of poverty and the inability to realise a specific functioning of being well-nourished. The other person is fasting, which, however, does not preclude the potential of achieving a state of being well-nourished. This individual prioritises the functioning of a religious, spiritual state over nourishment as they value the former more. Therefore, the crux of capability is the freedom to realise one's goals.

This dimension has to be considered when selecting indices for valued functionings necessary to determine quality of life. One of the prevalent analytical problems with assessing quality of life within the capability approach framework is identifying basic valued functionings. According to Nussbaum, basic capabilities are those necessary to attain other functionings. At the same time, Sen believes the notion of basic capability 'was intended to separate out the ability to satisfy certain crucially important functionings up to certain minimally adequate levels'.¹⁵² Still, there is no consensus in the capability approach circles as to what valued functioning is, other than a basic valued functioning. Sen proposes to make it relative by defining valued functionings as 'functioning that people have reason to value'.¹⁵³ However, it is not that simple to identify valued functionings based on preferences. An individual's preferences may not coincide with what is good for them due to differences in access to information or their limited cognitive functions. As a result, any measurement of quality of life within the capability approach needs an explication of the criteria for identifying functionings.

Now, agency can be defined as the individual's freedom to pursue the goals they deem worthwhile. As Sen emphasised, the full scope of the individual's freedom exceeds the capability domain because the scope of goals can include both personal and social objectives. Nonetheless, capabilities remain the central component of the individual's freedom. Their advantages are evaluated using a fourfold classification based on two distinctions. The first concerns the goal of the evaluation, which may focus on the individual's well-being (defined as quality of life improvement) or pursuit of their overall agency goals, regardless of how they affect the person's well-being. Hence, the goals can go beyond personal well-being and be founded on a different hierarchy of values rather than simply referring to well-being only. The other distinction concerns the result. It can focus either on evaluating the person's achievements or their extent of freedom to achieve. Brought together, the two distinctions make up a typology of advantages related to a person: well-being achievement, agency achievement, well-

152 Sen 1993, p. 41.

153 Sen 1999, p. 53.

being freedom, and agency freedom.¹⁵⁴ The typology enables the evaluation of advantages while preserving the distinction between the types. Sen illustrates the distinctions with an example of a malnourished or ill person who pursues a personal achievement to build a monument to their hero. State intervention for the benefit of the individual will be aimed at their well-being (preventing malnutrition or illness), not at achieving the goal of erecting the memorial, even though it is more urgent for the person than their malnutrition or illness.¹⁵⁵ Still, state agencies will focus on well-being freedom (by providing support to overcome malnutrition) rather than the person actually achieving well-being. This makes the problems relevant to quality of life assessment because a reference to a specific type of advantage evaluation results in different valuations, which should be taken into account.

This approach presents well-being achievement as an evaluation of the individual's life from the perspective of their condition and frame of mind rather than through broadly understood goals. This is why it is essential to define which well-being components are directly linked to the person's functionings. Note that well-being perceived in relation to a person may include *inter alia* activities to the benefit of others that may add to the person's fulfilment or satisfaction and are related to functioning achievements. Here, functionings are at the heart of well-being, even though its sources may lie beyond the individual. Functionings can comprise the most elementary ones, such as health or nourishment, and more multiplex ones, like social life or self-worth. The person's capabilities made up of such functionings are still debated (as is the nomenclature),¹⁵⁶ and even the most prominent authors like Sen and Nussbaum could not agree on the list of essential capabilities.¹⁵⁷

In reaction to the terminological discrepancies, the multifaceted application of the capability framework, and the concept's evolution in the literature today, Ingrid Robeyns proposed a modular approach.¹⁵⁸ Its central part, the A-module, contains eight fundamental principles.¹⁵⁹ These are (a) functionings and capabilities as core concepts; (b) functionings and capabilities defined as value-neutral categories; (c) diverse capabilities people have access to convert resources into functionings; (d) the distinctions between means and ends—since it should always be determined whether something is valued as an end or as a means; (e) if the capability framework is considered a normative theory, functionings and capabilities form the evaluative space or part of the space; (f) at the same time,

154 Sen 1993.

155 Sen 1993.

156 The description employs nomenclature proposed by Amartya Sen.

157 Fukuda-Parr / Cid-Martinez 2019, p. 446.

158 Robeyns 2017.

159 Robeyns 2017, pp. 38–59.

functionings and capabilities are not the only components of ultimate values (for example, procedural fairness can be a value in the capability theory and is not reducible to a functioning or a capability); (g) value pluralism; and (h) every person is morally equal, which Nussbaum framed as valuing each person as an end.¹⁶⁰ Depending on whether the capability approach is applied to the theory of justice, international comparisons, or policy evaluation for well-being, additional modules that are tailored to the specific analytical needs must be used. This modular framework enhances the applicational flexibility and practicability of the capability approach to diverse problem and disciplinary areas while preserving a coherent theoretical core.

The capability approach plays a vital role in quality of life and subjective well-being research. It provides theoretical foundations for the human development approach. The latter concentrates on expanding people's capabilities to live lives they value instead of focusing solely on economic growth and wealth accumulation. The literature presents the human development approach as an extension of the capability approach, integrating it into social policies, social indices, and national and global strategies. According to Alkire and Deneulin (2009), the human development approach encompasses justice, equality, and participation, which makes it a more practical tool for assessing social development. The human development approach is credited to Pakistani economist Mahbub ul-Haq, who proposed the Human Development Index in collaboration with Amartya Sen. This index, designed under the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), goes beyond the traditional indices of economic growth used in economics, covering education and life expectancy as key indicators of well-being. It is now at the core of annual UNDP reports published since 1990. The reports aim to evaluate social and economic progress in terms broader than just economic growth by encompassing quality of life indices as well. Each report focuses on a different, relevant social problem, such as inequalities, climate change, or global security. In addition to the UNDP reports, about a hundred countries publish their national or regional Human Development Reports.¹⁶¹ Their purpose is to evaluate quality of life in the countries, but they are also useful for guiding and evaluating policies aimed at improving quality of life.

The capability approach is increasingly used in quality of life research. It was operationalised for well-being research under studies on empirical methods for measuring capabilities and their impact on diverse aspects of health and social well-being.¹⁶² A study in Finland that employed this operationalisation to investigate underprivileged and vulnerable groups (long-term unemployed, refugees,

160 Nussbaum 2000, p. 56.

161 Zwierzchowski / Panek 2020.

162 Anand / Hunter / Smith 2005.

or older people) demonstrated that capabilities are central both as direct determinants of quality of life and as intermediaries between structural conditions (such as education or income) and the person's well-being.¹⁶³

Furthermore, the capability approach was the basis for Beyond GDP reports¹⁶⁴ and the Stiglitz Commission¹⁶⁵, which provoked a discussion in the European Commission about the need to complement GDP with additional indices that would measure the social and environmental dimensions of development to arrive at policies that are both cohesive and comprehensive. The Stiglitz Commission's report emphasised the importance of using appropriate statistical indices to describe social development and the need to take society's quality of life into account in relative measures. The Final Report of the Expert Group Quality of Life Indicators emphasises the importance of subjective well-being as one of nine quality of life dimensions in the European Statistical System.¹⁶⁶

Subjective well-being

The pivot towards subjective aspects of quality of life initiated by Campbell and colleagues contributed to a terminological overlap between subjective quality of life and subjective well-being. The concepts are often considered synonyms both in public and academic discourse. Still, they originate from different traditions, with different theoretical backgrounds and measurement methods.¹⁶⁷ The overlap is particularly relevant when quality of life is considered within the psychological framework. It obfuscates the discourse on happiness and mental health studies.¹⁶⁸ In addition, both terms are linked to the notion of life satisfaction. The latter is sometimes perceived as an indicator of subjective quality of life¹⁶⁹ or as a sub-concept of a broader category of quality of life.¹⁷⁰

Norman Bradburn was among the first to study subjective well-being. He proposed considering positive and negative affects as independent phenomena, not two extremes of the same continuum.¹⁷¹ Studies on subjective well-being employ tools that measure the two dimensions independently. Other pioneers of subjective well-being research include Frank Andrews and Stephen Whitney. Their work was more than just an attempt to use empirical research to measure

163 Mäki-Opas / Pieper / Vaarama 2022.

164 Commission of European Communities 2009.

165 Stiglitz / Sen / Fitoussi 2009.

166 Eurostat 2017.

167 Stewart-Brown 2015.

168 Skevington / Böhnke 2018.

169 Sirgy 1998.

170 Diener 2006.

171 Bradburn 1969.

subjective well-being. They also employed subjective indicators of quality of life,¹⁷² promoting the inclusion of subjective well-being in the overall quality of life assessment.¹⁷³ Subjective well-being was reinterpreted under Diener's psychological theory. He identified three components: positive affect, negative affect, and overall affect, and cautioned that they should be considered independently despite being intertwined.

The concept of subjective well-being is linked not only to subjective quality of life but also to the psychological definition of happiness. Both are jointly used as catch-all phrases.¹⁷⁴ At the broadest level, happiness is perceived through the lens of the philosophical distinction between the hedonic and eudaimonic views of happiness. Sirgy¹⁷⁵ distinguishes psychological happiness, prudential happiness, and perfectionist happiness, based on Haybron's typology,¹⁷⁶ seeking to integrate these ideas into a single concept.

He equates psychological happiness to hedonic or emotional well-being, which is perceived as pleasure, a state of joy and bliss. It is a positive emotional state of a person at a point in time. Seen in this way, subjective well-being is measured by balancing positive (joy or satisfaction) and negative (sadness or anger) emotions or a sum of momentary pleasures.¹⁷⁷ The Intensity and Time Affect Scale (ITAS) is the most common method for measuring hedonic well-being.¹⁷⁸ Drawing on Frisch's concept that quality of life is the same as life satisfaction,¹⁷⁹ Sirgy defines prudential happiness as life satisfaction, equalling it with the cognitive component of subjective well-being.¹⁸⁰ Therefore, prudential happiness is a state whereby an individual achieves mental well-being¹⁸¹ through the actualisation of their potential and personal fulfilment. Thus, it transcends the mere psychological happiness (or experience of pleasure) and aligns with the philosophical concept of the good life. Psychological (hedonic) happiness alone would fall short of the good life defined in this way¹⁸² and would hinder life satisfaction. In terms of measurement, it can encompass the individual's evaluation of satisfied needs, attained goals, and realised desires by juxtaposing their experiences with what they consider to be the suitable standard. The examples provided are consistent with the perception of life satisfaction as an indicator of

172 Andrews / Whitney 1976.

173 Zwierchowski / Panek 2020.

174 Sirgy 2012, p. vii.

175 Sirgy 2012, p. 7.

176 Haybron 2000.

177 Parducci 1995.

178 Diener / Smith / Fujita 1995.

179 Frisch 1998 / Frisch 1999 / Frisch 2000 / Frisch 2001.

180 Sirgy 2012, p. 13.

181 Veenhoven 2000.

182 Kesebir / Diener 2009.

subjective quality of life, such as the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS). Through this perspective, the framework can be adapted to diverse areas of life, covering mental factors, social relationships, and living standards.¹⁸³ The conceptual overlap of quality of life and the subjective well-being approach is particularly evident here because Sirgy considers both Campbell and colleagues and typical representatives of subjective well-being, like Diener, as sharing the same outlook.¹⁸⁴

Sirgy equates perfectionist happiness with the eudaimonic approach. The good life means something more here than just the experience of pleasure (psychological happiness) or the actualisation of the person's potential. It is a concept of the good life as a moral life in line with the Aristotelian tradition. The inclusion of philosophical eudaimonic components has expanded the psychological perspective on well-being.¹⁸⁵ Eudaimonia (εὐδαιμονία) is the happiness obtained through a life founded on virtue (ἀρετή). The individual achieves well-being and at the same time leads a moral life.¹⁸⁶ Sirgy illustrates this understanding of quality of life with the concept of Lane's perfectionist happiness with nine subjective dimensions of quality of life.¹⁸⁷ Collectively, they reflect an individual's subjective well-being (mental health) and the expansion of their social competencies (social individual responsibility). In terms of research, perfectionist happiness is measured with the Meaning in Life Questionnaire-Presence Subscale (MLQ-P)¹⁸⁸ and Purpose-in-Life (PIL).¹⁸⁹

The concept Sirgy brought forward is compatible with the approach of Seligman, who is the author of positive psychology. He distinguishes between a pleasant life, an engaged life or a good life, and a meaningful life,¹⁹⁰ which have analogues in Sirgy's typology referred to above.¹⁹¹ Although Sirgy's contribution of integrating and structuring the approach to happiness from the psychological perspective is incontestable, he fails to properly differentiate between methods typical of quality of life and social well-being by using them interchangeably. This attitude could be justified by the semantic convergence of these terms in recent years. On the one hand, the definition of quality of life proposed by the WHO includes mental health, psychological conditions, level of independence, social relationships, and references to relevant environmental factors of an individual's

183 Yiengprugsawan / Seubsman / Khamman / Lim / Sleight 2010.

184 Diener / Emmons / Larsen / Griffin 1985; Diener / Horwitz / Emmons 1985.

185 Keyes / Shmotkin / Ryff 2002.

186 Haybron 2000; Sirgy 2012, p. 18.

187 Lane 2001.

188 Steger / Frazier / Oishi / Kaler 2006.

189 Chamberlain / Zika 1988.

190 Seligman 2002.

191 Sirgy / Wu, 2013.

life,¹⁹² thus clearly introducing psychological aspects typical of the perception of subjective well-being to date. On the other hand, the increased impact of subjective considerations in the quality of life discourse is accompanied by a semantic shift in the area of subjective quality of life, best exemplified by Diener's definition: 'An umbrella term for different valuations that people make regarding their lives, the events happening to them, their bodies and minds, and the circumstances in which they live.'¹⁹³ Therefore, many scholars believe the notions have never been more closely aligned.¹⁹⁴ Nevertheless, despite the increasing convergence (mainly in psychology), important differences between the concepts are still observable. Quality of life is a multidimensional construct. It encompasses a person's perceived life position or situation in diverse domains, like health, social relationships, and environmental and material factors, construed through the lens of sociocultural values of the system in which they live. In contrast, subjective well-being concentrates on an individual's experience of happiness and life satisfaction rooted in hedonic (psychological happiness) and eudaimonic perspectives that cover pleasure and meaning in life. Despite the conceptual convergence, the notion of quality of life covers subjective assessments of such objective factors as health, financial standing, and functional independence. At the same time, subjective well-being is, in its very nature, more subjective and founded on the individual's experiences and emotional states.

Therefore, a mere reduction of the difference to the sophistication of theoretical and methodological backgrounds is unsatisfactory. Even if quality of life research focuses mainly on methodology and measurement tools and the subjective quality of life discourse is more advanced in terms of theory than methods,¹⁹⁵ the two are not complementary. Even more so, considering that the relationships between models of subjective well-being and quality of life and their respective metrics are yet to be thoroughly investigated.¹⁹⁶

Subjective and objective quality of life assessment

Although subjective well-being and quality of life are intertwined, they vary in their consideration of objective factors. Undoubtedly, both subjective and objective metrics need to be employed in quality of life research. If quality of life is indeed to cover the entirety of human life, the two dimensions have to be taken into account. However, the very question of objective metrics can prove problematic. The difference between the objective and subjective dimensions of quality

192 WHOQOL 1994.

193 Diener 2006, p. 400.

194 Camfield / Skevington 2008, p. 766.

195 Camfield / Skevington 2008, p. 766.

196 Skevington / Epton 2018.

of life is blurred in the case of subjective well-being. Assuming that no quantifiable perception of quality of life is possible apart from the individual's ability to experience the world, every 'objective' dimension is, in fact, mediated by personal experience. Referring to autodeclarative indicators, Andrews and Whitman conclude that 'objective indicators of these matters involve subjective judgements. Conversely, it can be argued that many subjective indicators (such as people's evaluations of their lives) provide rather direct and objective measurements of what they intend to measure.'¹⁹⁷ Cummins criticises such a subjectivistic approach, arguing that the differentiation between the objective and subjective dimensions of quality of life offers a greater heuristic value than the relativisation of these dimensions to a question of perception. If—Cummins continues—the distinction between objective and subjective indices is superimposed on the distinction between public and private experience, they are not only reliable but also unequivocally dissimilar.¹⁹⁸ In this sense, the remuneration has an objective dimension expressed in an intersubjectively shared measure of an amount. The dimension is identical to diverse parties as they use the same method of counting or measuring. At the same time, everyone's subjective evaluation of their remuneration will be different. An objectively identical amount may be subjectively high or low for two people. What is more, such judgements are predictable and consistent to a certain degree. Research shows that subjective assessments are both reliable and accurate, as evidenced by Cummins's studies revealing consistent satisfaction levels across the population.¹⁹⁹

The distinction between the objective and subjective dimensions of quality of life leads to a highly relevant question of their interrelations. Cummins demonstrates that metrics in the subjective and objective dimensions are more correlated internally than externally. As he proves with multiple studies, correlations between objective measures and correlations between subjective measures are stronger than correlations between subjective and objective measures.²⁰⁰ It comes as no surprise, considering that objectively higher remuneration is usually associated with objectively better access to health care and better formal education. Similar co-dependencies can be observed regarding subjective factors because people with higher life satisfaction are generally happier and exhibit lower depression indices. Cummins proposes to account for the weak relationship between objective and subjective quality of life measures with the concept of well-being homeostasis. He assumes people can adapt to diverse (objective) conditions to a high degree while maintaining a positive view of

197 Andrews / Whitney 1976, p. 5.

198 Cummins 2000.

199 Cummins 1996; Cummins 1998.

200 Cummins 2000.

themselves and their lives. This is necessary to ensure the functioning of individuals and to avoid tension, stress, and depression. Considering that a positive mindset is essential for an individual's functioning in the long term, he holds that people must have adapted to keeping subjective well-being at a 'normal' level under diverse circumstances through evolution.²⁰¹

The concept of well-being homeostasis aligns with the results, indicating a long-term stable level of subjective well-being, which recovers even after difficult experiences and temporary deterioration.²⁰² It is also consistent with empirical observations that a certain independence of the subjective and objective dimensions of quality of life exists, as mentioned above. Furthermore, it can also explain the growing correlation of (low) perceptions under a low level of objective conditions, especially income. A long-lasting deprivation of objective quality of life dimensions can disrupt the cognitive homeostasis of subjective well-being, leading to lower ratings of subjective quality of life. Therefore, the correlation between subjective and objective measures is stronger on lower levels of quality of life than on higher levels. Cummins introduces the notion of an adaptation threshold below which objectively challenging living standards reduce subjective quality of life. This mechanism accounts for the non-linear relationship between happiness and income level. An increase in income causes a significant growth of happiness when the income starting point is the lowest. The higher it is, the lower the impact on happiness. In other words, happiness does improve with higher income, but the increase is more significant among those who are the worst off than those with a slightly higher remuneration. The improvement is negligible among the wealthiest segment of the population.²⁰³ In Cummins's terms, if an individual's income is above the adaptation threshold, an increase does not contribute to better subjective quality of life in the long run despite higher indicators of objective quality of life.

To sum up, the subjective and objective dimensions of quality of life are largely independent. Still, considering solely subjective measures of quality of life would be unreasonable because objective factors do play an important role, especially at the lowest tier of the objective dimension. Therefore, both are relevant to a comprehensive evaluation of quality of life.

The idea of well-being homeostasis converges with the claim supported by many studies that objective factors fail to account for subjective quality of life. Nevertheless, the relationships between objective conditions and subjective experiences of individuals fluctuate over time.²⁰⁴ Even though homeostasis explains

201 Cummins 2000.

202 Cummins 1995; Cummins 1996; Cummins 1998.

203 Diener / Sandvik / Seidlitz / Diener 1993.

204 Schwarz / Strack 1999.

changes in perceived quality of life during crises such as unemployment,²⁰⁵ the variability of life satisfaction cannot be confined to a simple homeostasis mechanism. It is because quality of life and satisfaction are not merely categories describing a specific moment in line with hedonic terms. Instead, they should also be considered within the perspective of the perception (construction of a mental representation) of life as a whole.²⁰⁶ Hence, a crisis leading to a momentary deterioration of quality of life may become a reference point for the future as a point of contrast in the person's mental frame of reference.

This means that quality of life should be considered a process due to the variability of subjective quality of life. Perceptions of life as better or worse are set in the framework of relative changes, which confirms that quality of life is a temporal and processual concept.²⁰⁷ Still, most research on quality of life is by necessity structural, temporal, and cross-sectional.

Integrated concepts of quality of life

The distinction between evaluating available resources and subjective quality of life encouraged several attempts to develop integrated approaches to quality of life that would cover both dimensions comprehensively.

Drawing on the concept of basic needs, Erik Allardt proposed a modified Scandinavian approach to quality of life measuring, focused on objective needs irrespective of subjective judgements of individuals.²⁰⁸ He identified three groups of basic needs: (1) needs related to tangible and non-tangible resources (having), (2) needs related to love, solidarity, and community (loving), and (3) needs related to self-actualisation and opposing alienation (being).²⁰⁹ The needs of having cover such material conditions as income and wealth, living conditions, employment, working conditions, health, and education. Emotional states (loving) identified by Allardt encompass the person's social life: attachment to and relationships with a local community, family and friend ties, friendships, relationships with others in organisations or associations, and workplace relationships.²¹⁰ The indicators of being cover participation in decision-making relevant to the person, political activity, opportunities for rest, fulfilling job, and opportunities to commune with nature.²¹¹

205 Bańka 1995.

206 Bańka 2005.

207 Pospěch / Delín / Spěšná 2009.

208 Erikson 1993.

209 Allardt 1993, p. 89.

210 Allardt 1993, p. 91.

211 Allardt 1993, p. 91.

Allardt suggests measuring each group of basic needs with objective and subjective ratings. When measuring housing conditions, one can focus on the objective metric of living space and amenities. Or should the focus be on the perception of these conditions by the people who live there? As there are no quantifiable relationships between objective and subjective measures of quality of life, the only way is to consider both types of indicators in research. In the adopted classification, objective evaluations refer to actual conditions and overt behaviours, while subjective measures are equated with attitudes. The author superimposes another classification on this framework, distinguishing between needs and wants. Subjective evaluations concern wants, and objective perceptions are linked to needs, although they also can cover some wants.

When combined with having, loving, and being, the dichotomous objective and subjective evaluations yield six groups of indicators: (1) objective measures of living standards and environmental conditions, (2) objective measures of interpersonal relationships, (3) objective measures of relationships with society and environment, (4) subjective perception of (dis)satisfaction with living standards, (5) subjective evaluation of happiness or lack thereof in interpersonal relationships, and (6) a subjective sense of alienation or personal growth.²¹² This system of indicators can be integrated into a single, holistic study because, as suggested by Allardt, people can be asked about the living area of their house, the number of rooms, and equipment to measure living standards objectively, and then about their satisfaction with the living standards. The incorporation of all groups of needs measured with the two types of metrics provides a synthetic view of quality of life.

Veenhoven takes a slightly different view on distinguishing objective and subjective perspectives. He points out two dimensions relevant to the distinction. The first dimension focuses on the substance of what is measured. In principle, things can exist objectively independent of the observer's consciousness. Under this scheme, a sickness exists objectively as microbes proliferate in the body, even if the individual has not realised it yet. The other dimension concerns the difference regarding assessment. While objective evaluations follow from precise criteria of an external observer, a subjective measurement involves self-evaluations based on opaque criteria.²¹³ Together, the two dimensions of subjectivity and objectivity give rise to a fourfold scheme. Metrics that are objective regarding substance and assessment can be illustrated with a person's wealth and bank account figures. Substantially objective wealth can still be measured with a subjective self-evaluation of wealth by a person. Subjective substantial criteria, like happiness or lack thereof, can be measured with an objective suicide index or

212 Allardt 1993, p. 94.

213 Veenhoven 2004.

a subjective self-evaluation of happiness. Veenhoven additionally proposed mixed indicators because the line between the objective and subjective dimensions is not always clear-cut. The resulting matrix, encompassing the three types of indicators and their substance and assessment features, comprises nine categories of indicators. For example, a doctor's diagnosis of illness based on the patient's description of how they feel is objective in terms of substance and mixed in terms of assessment.

In his concept of quality of life, Veenhoven assumes two dichotomous criteria. The first is founded on the opportunity for the good life (life-chances) and results (life-results). Life-chances concern conditions and means. However, they do not necessarily need to translate directly into results. The other distinction concerns properties of the external environment (outer qualities) and attributes of the individual (inner qualities). With these four criteria, Veenhoven identifies four types of quality of life.

The combination of outer qualities and life-chances means having a good life. Living in a good environment is about what sociologists usually consider quality of life, i. e. living standards: general well-being, wealth, and favourable qualities of the environment where the person lives. The environment means the living environment.

Life opportunities related to the agentive qualities of the person (their life-ability) concern the resources available to the individual to cope with life. This perspective is typical of psychological and medical approaches. It covers health, personality, mental resilience, etc. They are the capabilities of proper functioning.

When it comes to results, outer qualities are related to the worth for the world,²¹⁴ also referred to by Veenhoven as the utility of life.²¹⁵ It denotes the person's contribution to the community and their tangible or spiritual achievements in a broader perspective.

In the context of inner qualities, life-results mean satisfaction or enjoyment of life. They stand for a person's individually perceived advantage, well-being, or happiness: their subjective appreciation of their life.

The strength of Veenhoven's concept is that each type of quality of life can be measured with indicators categorised according to the ninefold typology described above. Moreover, Veenhoven's quality of life typology is critically compared to such other proposals as the HDI, WHO's quality of life scale, or the quality of life dimensions proposed by Allardt.²¹⁶

214 Veenhoven 2004.

215 Veenhoven 2009.

216 Veenhoven 2004.

Wolfgang Zapf's approach to research on quality of life, born from the German tradition, is also worth mentioning. His concept is based on the juxtaposition of objective living standards and subjective well-being in various areas of life. Objective conditions include material means, working conditions, health, and interpersonal relationships. Subjective well-being covers the cognitive and emotional aspects of perceived living standards in different domains. Zapf proposed four types of life quality states based on a simple distinction between good and bad living standards juxtaposed with good or bad subjective well-being. A high level of well-being is achieved only if good living standards and high-level subjective well-being occur together. Conversely, a situation where subjective well-being comes with poor objective living standards is considered adaptation. The opposite of adaptation is dissonance, a situation in which good living standards are coupled with a low rating of subjective well-being. The worst-case scenario in the quality of life typology is deprivation, when bad living standards are combined with a low rating of subjective well-being. This is the same as when the threshold is crossed in the framework of the well-being homeostasis concept, when low subjective perceptions start to correlate with low values of objective quality of life indicators.²¹⁷

Zapf's concept of measuring quality of life and the indicators he and his team proposed in a panel study on quality of life in Germany²¹⁸ were subsequently modified by Heinz-Herbert Noll and Regina Berger-Schmitt and included in the European system of social indicators.

Their concept of quality of life considers objective and subjective dimensions at the level of an individual and society. At the personal level, quality of life replicates objective conditions and subjective well-being. At the social level, it covers the factors of social cohesion and sustainability. Personal-level objective conditions of objectively considered quality of life include resources available to individuals for meeting basic needs, together with attained living standards. This way, both possibilities and results of putting the resources to use are taken into account. On a personal level, subjective quality of life covers cognitive and emotional aspects. According to the authors, social policy should aim to improve both dimensions of quality of life. Quality of life can be assessed as a whole by considering the objective and subjective dimensions together to produce coherent or divergent judgements about the extent to which needs are being met according to Zapf's typology.

The distinguishing characteristic of Noll and Berger-Schmitt's concept is its consideration of social level of quality of life in terms of social cohesion and sustainable development.

217 Zapf 1984.

218 Glatzer 2012.

The authors focused on two areas of social cohesion. The first one covers inequalities, diversity, and exclusion. The other concerns social relationships, ties, and inclusion, or social capital in a narrower sense.²¹⁹ Social exclusion and inequalities directly damage quality of life. They can be perceived as an objectively unfavourable (which makes it quantifiable) situation of an individual regarding the distribution of (tangible and intangible) resources. Alternatively, it can be a characteristic inherent to social institutions, a component of a general set of opportunities available to individuals within a society.

Social cohesion is a classical sociological category concerning the bonding aspect of relationships among members of society. It encompasses social relationships, belonging, and identification with a group. This dimension of social cohesion directly affects quality of life because, according to sociological research, there is a link between social cohesion and macroeconomic indicators,²²⁰ health, and well-being²²¹. Hence, on the one hand, social cohesion would improve the quality of life of community members, but on the other hand, it could be regarded as a characteristic of the life situation of these people.

One can similarly perceive social capital as a more specific characteristic of social cohesion. Social capital can be seen as a characteristic of a group, community, or society that benefits a person's well-being. Just like social ties, it emerges from interpersonal relationships, thus becoming a part of quality of life in a broad sense.

The idea of sustainable development is studied on three planes: economy, society, and environment. The link between sustainable development and quality of life stems from the fact that the ultimate goal of sustainable development is to improve the quality of life for all, today and in the future.²²²

The fundamental premise of Noll and Berger-Schmitt's concept is the interweaving of categories of quality of life of individuals and societies. The model can be conceptualised as concentric circles, with the individual's quality of life in the centre achieved by improving objective aspects of quality of life and reinforcing its subjective facets. When seen this way, personal quality of life is broadly linked to social cohesion, which involves bolstering social relationships and reducing territorial diversification and social inequalities. In the broadest domain of sustainability, it concerns social capital, human capital, and natural capital as a property of present and future generations.²²³

219 Berger-Schmitt, Noll 2000.

220 Putnam 1993.

221 O'Connor 1998.

222 Wiman 1999.

223 Panek 2016.

2.5 Assessment of standards of living

A great body of research has been devoted to evaluating standards of living and quality of life in Poland. However, bulk of the studies focus on individual cities²²⁴ and broadly defined urban areas,²²⁵ paying less attention to rural populations.²²⁶ Taking the characteristics of the countryside into consideration when investigating quality of life can address this gap, but more importantly, it is vital for a comprehensive understanding of the quality of life in Poland. The quality of life framework developed by Noll and Berger-Schmitt,²²⁷ where the individual's quality of life is viewed in the context of society's quality of life, helps capture the individual's standards of living combined with a subjective assessment of the quality of life and broader societal circumstances, such as bonds, social relations, trust, or social capital in investigations on rural communities. While the present study, drawing inspiration from the abovementioned concept, adopts selected aspects reflecting basic dimensions of rural life, it refrains from copying all the original metrics. Noll and Berger-Schmitt's concept, illustrated as concentric circles (Fig. 1), considers quality of life as the innermost component of rural areas analysis. Given the diversified access to infrastructure, public services, and labour markets across villages, it has to encompass both objective aspects of quality of life (such as standards of living) and their subjective assessment. Quality of social life is the outer component describing the situation of the Polish countryside. It places an individual's experience in a broader context of social capital and social relationships. Hence, the journey across the social situation in the Polish countryside proposed here is outward, starting with quality of life (its objective and subjective dimensions) and moving towards quality of social life (in social networks, social engagement, and social capital). Quality of social life is discussed in Chapter III on social capital. This chapter presents results on standards of living and subjective assessments of selected aspects of quality of life.

The quality of life dimensions covered in the study have not been converted into a single synthetic index. Undoubtedly, the available methods for constructing compound metrics and indices could be employed to synthesise quality of life. Still, it would not be in line with the purpose of the study. Aggregate indices offer substantial comparative potential. However, they would have to be juxtaposed with similar metrics for urban communities or used to reveal internal

224 Masik / Sagan / Frankowski / Stępień 2018; Winiarczyk-Raźniak 2008; Pacuk / Anisiewicz / Czochański / Kopeć / Połom / Michalski / Tarkowski 2016; Piróg / Kotarski 2018; Zygmunt 2017.

225 Szoltysek 2018.

226 Rakowski 2003.

227 Berger-Schmitt / Noll 2000.

differences in the countryside. In contrast, this project aims to portray overall changes in the Polish countryside. Hence, it focuses on selected aspects of the quality of life of rural residents and the quality of life of the rural community.

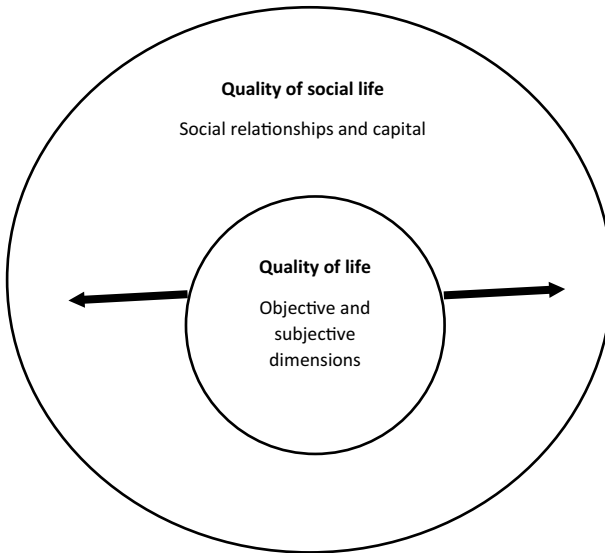


Figure 1. Relationship between quality of life and quality of social life in the countryside: Source: Original work based on Berger-Schmitt, Noll 2000 and Panek 2016.

The authors employed purposefully selected metrics rather than comprehensive quality of life scales for several reasons. First, the study aims to identify changes in the Polish countryside. To do this, it is necessary to focus on the dimensions most often included in nationwide analyses of rural quality of life, such as living conditions, economic activity, or access to public services. Second, organisational limitations and the specificity of the investigated milieu suggested indicators that best reflect the situation of rural communities instead of extensive and universal tools that might not fully reflect the realities of local communities. Third, rural quality of life cannot be analysed solely with measures applicable to urban studies. Rural areas' economic, social, and cultural characteristics call for particular metrics tailored indicators to capture the unique functional aspects of rural communities.²²⁸

In line with Noll and Berger-Schmitt's concept, the present study on quality of life covers objective and subjective aspects. Standards of living are a central component of the objective quality of life.²²⁹ However, the objective factors were

228 Shucksmith / Cameron / Merridew / Pichler 2009.

229 Berger-Schmitt / Noll 2000.

not measured with external statistical measures, like the average floor area per capita or income levels. Instead, the metrics employed here are mainly objective in terms of substance but subjective in terms of assessment, according to Veenhoven's classification.²³⁰ These are respondents' declarations concerning their household facilities, self-assessment of their financial standing, and economic activities in which they engage. Their input is complemented by more subjective assessments of satisfaction with household standards of living. Improving standards of living, which have long been below those in urban areas, was among the central goals of the Polish social policy.²³¹ The fundamental dimension of standards of living is home amenities, which determine the potential to satisfy the material needs of rural residents. According to Allardt, they are part of the *having* dimension of quality of life.²³² In Veenhoven's framework, home amenities fall under the category of objective good conditions for living.²³³ Still, the study involves purposefully selected elements, rather than simple reproductions of the relevant areas.

Evaluation of the financial standing of Polish rural households is an important metric of quality of life for living conditions. The results reflect a relatively stable economic situation because 30% of the respondents indicated that they could afford additional expenses beyond basic needs every month, and 33% could afford additional expenses from time to time. This means that over 60% of rural residents have the financial means to improve their standards of living, which supports a conservative conclusion that standards of living and income in rural areas have improved over time. This finding is consistent with similar studies on quality of life in Poland.²³⁴ At the same time, nearly one-third admitted that their income could cover only essential spending, which may lead to no savings and limited ability to invest in improved home amenities.

Some households are in a difficult financial situation; a total of 4.4% reported being unable to pay basic bills from time to time or regularly. Although the percentage might seem small, it is indicative of a group of economically excluded rural residents. This situation may negatively affect their quality of life and the development opportunities available to them.

Financial standing assessment and home amenities align with the distinction between needs and wants. Allardt links the former to welfare and the latter to the

230 Veenhoven 2004, p. 2.

231 Ignar 1980; Kaleta 1985; Ciura 2010; Sikora 2013; Gotowska / Majcherek / Jakubczak / Niedbalska 2013; Zawisza / Pachut 2015; Chmielewska/ Zegar 2018; Sompolska-Rzechuła / Kurdyś-Kujawska 2020; Chmielewska 2024, Kryszk / Kurowska / Marks-Bielska 2024.

232 Allardt 1993, p. 89.

233 Veenhoven 2004, p. 5.

234 Churski / Perdał 2022.

level of perceived happiness.²³⁵ Furthermore, rural home amenities indicate differences (or lack thereof) between rural and urban households. Basic amenities, such as central heating, domestic hot water, or a flush toilet, set a specific standard that can be considered to meet basic needs. The other components of rural home amenities can be used to identify potential areas of slower uptake of new technologies or exclusion, e. g. regarding Internet access.

The majority of the investigated households were sufficiently 'saturated' with essential durable goods. Not fewer than nine out of ten respondents reported having a flush toilet, Internet access, computer, central heating, public water supply, LCD television set, and hot running water in their households. All seven amenities were present in 77.3% of all the surveyed households. Paid television is a relatively common household feature, used by three-quarters of the sample (74.2%). Note that most households with Internet access use fibre optics (60%). A quarter use mobile connectivity (24.5%), and 15% resort to radio links. Internet access was reported by 97% of the respondents, which is slightly over 95.9% nationwide.²³⁶ Therefore, it is a valid conclusion that the countryside can easily access the Internet.

In summary, rural households enjoy access to basic amenities in terms of addressing basic needs (flush toilet, central heating, municipal water, or hot running water), electronics (television and computers), and access to information (the Internet, satellite/cable television). Fewer than half of the homes have a photovoltaic system (42.7%), a gas supply system (40.8%), or an outdoor CCTV system (35.3%) (Tab. 13).

Photovoltaics is a new feature of the Polish landscape, including rural areas. Preferential solutions and subsidies (numerous editions of 'My Electricity' programme) have driven the dynamic expansion of prosumer photovoltaic systems. The primary driver was the growing energy prices caused by an energy crisis. In 2022, prosumer photovoltaic systems accounted for 2.8 GW out of the 11.9 GW of the total installed capacity.²³⁷ Rural areas have great potential for photovoltaics. Nevertheless, changes in regulatory arrangements (from net-metering to net-billing), legal barriers to energy cooperatives in Poland,²³⁸ and limited transmission capacities were the primary obstacles to the growth in photovoltaic capacity (transmission limits lead to a sharp increase in the number of grid connection refusals by operators). Hence, the percentage of reported photovoltaic systems should be considered high in light of the economic, legal, and technical circumstances.

235 Allardt 1976, pp. 229–230.

236 Statistics Poland 2024, p. 110.

237 <https://wysokienapiecie.pl/81094-polska-fotowoltaika-trzyma-sie-mocno/> [access: 7. 02. 2025].

238 Orłowska / Suchacka / Trembaczowski / Ulewicz 2024.

Table 13. Durable goods in rural households [%]

| Good type | | | |
|--------------------------|-------------|------|------|
| Flush toilet | | 99.4 | |
| Internet access | fibre optic | 97.0 | 60.0 |
| | radio | | 15.5 |
| | mobile | | 24.5 |
| Computer | | 94.4 | |
| Central heating | | 94.0 | |
| Public water supply | | 93.9 | |
| LCD/plasma TV | | 93.8 | |
| Hot running water | | 93.4 | |
| Paid satellite/cable TV | | 74.2 | |
| Photovoltaic system | | 42.7 | |
| Domestic gas supply | | 40.8 | |
| Outdoor security cameras | | 35.3 | |

Source: original research.

The survey showed that 40.8% of the rural households had access to a gas supply network. This confirms technical and economic barriers to expanding gas supply systems in rural areas due to high installation costs in sparsely developed places. On the other hand, the potential to reduce air pollution from solid-fuel boilers (wood, coal) in the countryside is, therefore, limited.²³⁹ The answers in the survey demonstrate certain limitations, but despite the similar percentages for the two aspects, the insights they offer are dissimilar. The gas supply system has been expanding for years, yet rural municipalities still fall behind urban ones in this regard. Conversely, photovoltaics is more problematic in urban spaces.

Note further that home amenities (measured with the number of things at home) are weakly but clearly correlated with satisfaction with living conditions at home ($\tau\text{-}c=0.176$ for $p<0.01$). The more durable goods people have, the more satisfied they are with their household standard of living. This demonstrates a relationship between the objective dimension of the state of amenities and the subjective assessment of satisfaction. Despite the weak correlation between the variables, objectively good standards of living are associated with subjectively positive evaluation, which Zapf describes as well-being. Conversely, poor standards of living are associated with a subjectively low rating, which Zapf refers to as deprivation.²⁴⁰ Still, the low correlation level is insufficient to rule out dissonance and adaptation.

239 Woźniak / Kud 2022; Gradziuk / Gradziuk 2016.

240 Zapf 1984, p. 25.

Satisfaction with standards of living is a subjective aspect of the assessment of standards of living, apparently associated with objective factors, namely home amenities. Although this section focuses on objective factors, a subjective assessment of satisfaction with standards of living is an integral component of the evaluation.

Significantly higher satisfaction with the standards of living is associated with better education, marriage or divorce, and better financial standing. Migrants from cities and those whose ancestors did not live in the countryside are significantly more satisfied. These relationships are presented in Tab. 14.

Table 14. Basic sociodemographic groups' attachment to the place of living, satisfaction with the place of living, and satisfaction with living standards

| Sociodemographic characteristic | | Satisfaction with the living standards in the household |
|---------------------------------|---|---|
| Sex* | female | 4.47 |
| | male | 4.49 |
| Age** | 18–24 | 4.41 |
| | 25–34 | 4.53 |
| | 35–44 | 4.57 |
| | 45–59 | 4.48 |
| | 60 and older | 4.40 |
| Education** | primary | 4.38 |
| | vocational | 4.34 |
| | secondary | 4.44 |
| | post-secondary | 4.55 |
| | higher | 4.56 |
| Marital status* | unmarried | 4.36 |
| | married | 4.54 |
| | divorced | 4.48 |
| | widowed | 4.20 |
| Financial standing** | we can afford additional spending in addition to basic needs every month | 4.70 |
| | we can afford additional spending in addition to basic needs from time to time | 4.54 |
| | we're just covering our monthly expenses | 4.31 |
| | sometimes we don't have enough money to pay basic bills, such as rent or electricity | 3.90 |
| | we haven't been able to pay basic bills, such as rent or electricity, for some time now | 3.29 |

(Continued)

| Sociodemographic characteristic | | Satisfaction with the living standards in the household |
|---------------------------------|-------|---|
| Origin* | rural | 4.45 |
| | urban | 4.58 |
| Ancestors* | Yes | 4.44 |
| | No | 4.57 |

Note: Significant correlations are in bold. They were measured with * Cramer's V and ** tau-c.

The results show that satisfaction with standards of living in the household is correlated with financial standing. Those who reported being able to afford additional spending on top of current needs rated their standards of living the highest (4.7). At the same time, the respondents who struggled to pay basic bills were significantly less satisfied with their standards of living (3.29). Therefore, a stable economic situation is critical for rural quality of life.

The rated standards of living indicate the significance of economic factors in shaping the sense of well-being. Economic stability and education are the most prominent differentiators of satisfaction levels.

Obviously, household financial standing affects the assessment of standards of living. Still, it is determined not only by material goods but also by opportunities to create income and motivation to engage in activities leading to tangible benefits, be it financial or developmental. The stereotypical association of the countryside with agricultural work is becoming less pertinent as civilisational changes and economic development advance.²⁴¹ Poland's accession to the European Union and the Common Agricultural Policy expedited the process: even though it was not a primary goal of the policy to create jobs outside agriculture, its programmes have contributed to the shift.²⁴² However, the rural population still faces more labour market challenges than urban residents, which limits their potential to improve their standards of living. The problem lies not only in fewer non-agricultural jobs,²⁴³ but also in lower labour market flexibility due to lower levels of investment²⁴⁴ and fewer stable workplaces.²⁴⁵ Considering that work and the income it generates are dimensions of quality of life, the matter of additional

241 Woś 2002.

242 Karwat-Woźniak 2018.

243 Sieczko / Parzonko 2015.

244 Heffner 2013.

245 Szafranec / Szymborski / Wasielewski 2017; Zawalińska 2019.

forms of economic activity taken up by the respondents in line with the rural transformation was relevant.

The countryside offers space and conditions for specific activities, such as agritourism, rural tourism, handicrafts, culinary art, care farming, and learning farmsteads. According to the respondents, these activities are rather common in their places of living. Almost one in two (44.5%) reported handicraft or regional food product preparation in their village. Every third mentioned agritourism (36.5%) or rural tourism (34.5%). Learning farmsteads or care farms are much less widespread (15.3% and 7.9%, respectively).

Still, it is hardly possible to estimate the scale of the endeavours based on the answers because of the potential ecological fallacy of inferring the nature of individuals from aggregate data. In fact, the scale of these activities is marginal; the most common—handicraft and food—barely exceed 1%. On the other hand, some respondents declared that they themselves or their families could be interested in taking up some of these activities. The level of interest varied from 5.4% for care farms to 14.9% for agritourism (Tab. 15).

Table 15. Rural activities in which the respondents or their families engage or are interested

| Type of activity | Rural activity | Activity in which the respondent or their family engage | Activity in which the respondent or their family are interested |
|--|----------------|---|---|
| Handicraft, food: sale of regional food products, production of regional souvenirs | 44.5 | 1.2 | 12.7 |
| Agritourism: providing accommodation and catering to tourists who can participate in farm activities | 36.5 | 0.8 | 14.9 |
| Rural tourism: providing accommodation to tourists who do not participate in farm activities | 34.5 | 0.7 | 9.6 |
| Learning farmstead: demonstrating farm work to children | 15.3 | 0.7 | 10.3 |
| Care farm: care services for older people on farms | 7.9 | 0.1 | 5.4 |

Source: original research.

The results are consistent with the overall picture of transformation in the Polish countryside, where agritourism becomes more popular (including education through agriculture and traditional craft workshops)²⁴⁶ and new learning

246 Mahmoodi / Roman/ Prus 2022; Wiśniewska / Szymańska 2020.

farms²⁴⁷ and social farming communities are being established.²⁴⁸ Engaging in additional innovative economic activities contributes to quality of life. Although the objective quality factors are presented mainly from an economic perspective, they do have social and cultural dimensions. They improve the financial standing, rural household economy, income diversification, and economic stability. On the other hand, the development of agritourism, handicrafts, or learning farmsteads promotes social bonding and social capital. Care farms additionally address important social needs of the rural population.

Despite the relatively limited scope of these initiatives, the declared interest suggests a potential for future growth. Still, some activities require special capital, which reflects the structural challenges that limit the popularity of such activities. Hopefully, the engagement the respondents reported indicates the growing visibility of such projects within local communities. On a broader scale, the potential opportunities for engaging in such economic activities are an important factor shaping rural quality of life by integrating economic aspects with promoting social activity and tapping into the potential available to the residents. This leads to the analysis of intangible elements of quality of life.

2.6 Quality of life in rural areas

Quality of life analysis must not be limited merely to living standards, such as household amenities and appliances. Important as they are, such indicators do not provide a complete picture of well-being. The present section focuses on subjective aspects of quality of life, such as satisfaction with the place of living, perceived opportunities for development, or opinions on the accessibility of local services.

Literature reports measure quality of life with universal scales (such as the HDI and the European Quality of Life Survey). The present analysis has been aligned with the characteristics of the Polish countryside, taking into account variables that reflect the subjective perception of development opportunities, service availability, infrastructure, and migration plans reported by residents. Veenhoven's typology classifies these indicators as subjective in terms of substance and subjective in terms of assessment.²⁴⁹ This approach is founded on the assumption that rural quality of life is simultaneously shaped by individual experiences and structural conditions. These factors feed back into the experi-

247 Graja-Zwolińska / Maćkowiak / Majewski 2020.

248 Knapik 2020.

249 Veenhoven 2004, p. 2.

enced quality of life through access to education, labour market, and participatory mechanisms, to name just a few of the evaluated aspects.

With these variables, it is possible to cover a broader context of rural functioning and perceived quality of life. Research in other countries shows that attachment to the place of living is an integral part of life satisfaction in rural areas. Therefore, the investigated aspects include such domains as attachment to the place of living and rural life satisfaction.²⁵⁰ Furthermore, the study investigates infrastructure and public service satisfaction as these affect daily lives and create (or restrict) their functional opportunities²⁵¹ along with the subjective perception of the development opportunities.²⁵² Planned migration is a dissatisfaction indicator, assuming that dissatisfaction with important areas of rural life or living in a specific place can motivate people to change residence.²⁵³

Rural residents live under conditions different from those of urban populations, which affects the experienced quality of life. They often face limited access to infrastructure and some public services, and different labour market conditions. At the same time, their communities usually exhibit much higher levels of social cohesion and neighbour ties. Research to date indicates that life satisfaction is affected by material factors like income or living standards and intangible conditions, such as access to services, a sense of belonging to the local community, and opportunities to pursue one's aspirations.²⁵⁴ Moreover, studies conducted in Poland demonstrate that rural life satisfaction and health-related quality of life are affected by such factors as the duration of rural residence or social support, which entails stronger local ties.²⁵⁵

Results of the European Social Survey,²⁵⁶ in which Poland took part since 2002 and in the next 11 cycles (2002–2023), reveal an evolution in the level of life satisfaction in Poland over time.²⁵⁷ The lowest generalised life satisfaction was reported in 2002 (an average of 5.84 on a 0–10 scale). After that, satisfaction indicators grew regularly to reach the highest value of 7.42 in 2023. Notably, life satisfaction plummeted to 6.23 in the penultimate round of ESS in which Poland participated, right after the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁵⁸

Life satisfaction among the Polish population varied by the place of living. Rural respondents declared a higher level of life satisfaction in most rounds

250 Chipuer / Bramston / Pretty 2003; Zhou / Lai / Yuan 2021.

251 Dempsey 2009.

252 Seo 2023.

253 Caso / Carling / Hagen-Zanker / Vargas-Silva 2023.

254 Azizan / Mahmud 2018.

255 Tobiasz-Adamczyk / Zawisza 2017.

256 ESS 2024

257 One ESS indicator of life satisfaction is the answer to the question: 'All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays?' with a 0–10 scale.

258 The ESS10 round is dated 2020, but in Poland, it was conducted in the first half of 2022.

(2004–2006, 2010, 2012, 2016–2023) compared to town populations and especially compared to city residents (Fig. 2).

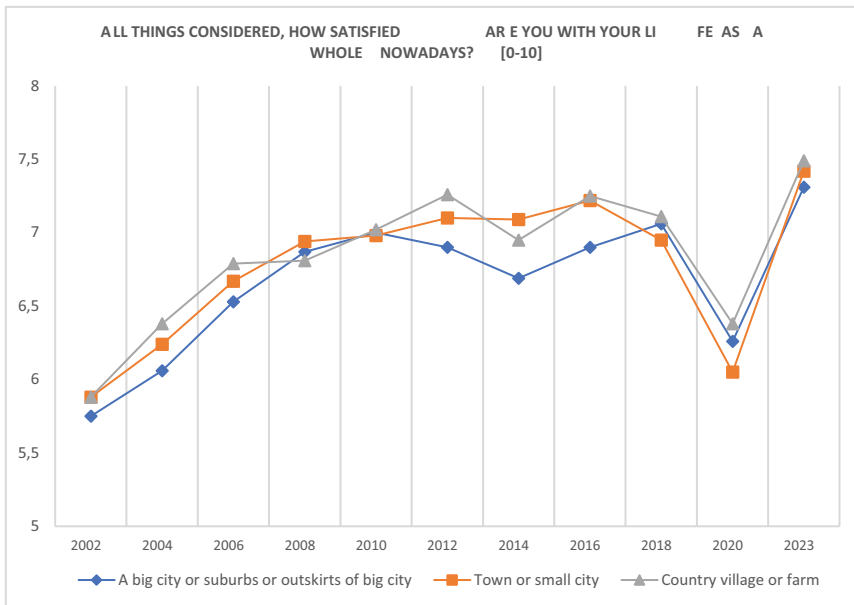


Figure 2. Life satisfaction in Poland depending on the place of living type. Source: ESS 2002–2023.

The present study investigates two aspects relevant to quality of life and life satisfaction: attachment to the place of living and satisfaction with the place of living.²⁵⁹ They are juxtaposed with satisfaction with the living standards discussed in the previous section. This approach promises a more comprehensive outlook. Generally, rural residents in Poland are satisfied with their place of living (4.29) and feel rather attached to it (3.86). However, satisfaction with living standards (4.48 on average) and the place of living are relatively higher than attachment to the place of living. Perception of the place of living and living standards are correlated ($\tau\text{-}b=0.358$ for $p<0.01$), just like satisfaction with the place of living and attachment to it ($\tau\text{-}b=0.374$ for $p<0.01$). In relative terms, the lowest correlation was found for attachment to the place of living and satisfaction with living standards ($\tau\text{-}b=0.112$ for $p<0.01$).

The research identified differences in answers from different demographics of the rural population.

259 The relevant questions were: 1) How strongly do you feel attached to your village? (1 – not attached at all, 5 – very attached) 2) All things considered, how satisfied are you with living in your place of living? (1 – very unsatisfied, 5 – very satisfied).

Greater attachment was reported by men than women, older people, those with lower education, divorced or widowed (compared to singles or married couples), and those worse off. This distribution of answers may suggest that attachment to the place of living can be a form of compensation to maintain stability and security in a context where resources (both material and cultural) may be limited for some respondents. Another study has demonstrated that social networks may improve subjective quality of life (at least regarding health) thanks to familiarity with surroundings and social support.²⁶⁰

Furthermore, the present study established that attachment to the place of living is stronger among people from rural areas and those whose ancestors (parents or grandparents) also lived in the countryside. Older people, wealthier people, and residents who moved from cities are significantly more satisfied with their place of living. More affluent people have greater (and probably more frequent) access to regional services. Still, the services are available outside their place of living, which affects satisfaction with rural life. Other sociodemographic variables were not significantly correlated with satisfaction with the place of living (Tab. 16).

Table 16. Basic sociodemographic characteristics vs attachment to the place of living, satisfaction with the place of living, and satisfaction with living standards

| Sociodemographic characteristic | | Attachment to the place of living | Satisfaction with the place of living |
|---------------------------------|----------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Sex* | female | 3.82 | 4.28 |
| | male | 3.91 | 4.30 |
| Age** | 18–24 | 3.44 | 4.18 |
| | 25–34 | 3.74 | 4.22 |
| | 35–44 | 3.69 | 4.15 |
| | 45–59 | 3.94 | 4.37 |
| | 60 and older | 4.12 | 4.40 |
| Education** | primary | 4.23 | 4.35 |
| | vocational | 4.08 | 4.28 |
| | secondary | 3.95 | 4.30 |
| | post-secondary | 3.52 | 4.13 |
| | higher | 3.72 | 4.29 |

260 Tobiasz-Adamczyk / Zawisza 2017.

(Continued)

| Sociodemographic characteristic | | Attachment to the place of living | Satisfaction with the place of living |
|---------------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Marital status* | unmarried | 3.64 | 4.04 |
| | married | 3.87 | 4.36 |
| | divorced | 4.00 | 4.24 |
| | widowed | 4.40 | 4.28 |
| Financial standing** | we can afford additional spending in addition to basic needs every month | 3.66 | 4.37 |
| | we can afford additional spending in addition to basic needs from time to time | 3.86 | 4.31 |
| | we're just covering our monthly expenses | 4.02 | 4.23 |
| | sometimes, we don't have enough money to pay essential bills, such as rent or electricity | 4.29 | 4.12 |
| | we haven't been able to pay essential bills, such as rent or electricity, for some time now | 3.82 | 3.71 |
| Original place of living* | rural | 3.95 | 4.27 |
| | urban | 3.55 | 4.37 |
| Ancestors* | Yes | 4.08 | 4.28 |
| | No | 3.47 | 4.31 |

Note: Significant correlations measured with * Cramer's V and ** tau-c are in bold.

Apparently, attachment to the place of living is generation-specific, while satisfaction with the place of living and satisfaction with living standards depend on socioeconomic status. Place attachment also frequently arises from extended residence in a place (sometimes the entire life) or rooting (living over several generations). In contrast, satisfaction with the living standards in a place can be affected by more factors, such as access to services or employment opportunities. Still, place attachment may be shaped by individual experiences and the level of social capital to a large extent.²⁶¹

It is relevant at this point that two-thirds of the respondents reported that some of their family members had resided in their place of living before (65.1%). The respondents most frequently mentioned their parents (81.0%), grandparents (67.0%), and others (40.8%). Their families have often lived in the village for generations. Every third (37%) reported that their parents and grandparents had lived there. For every fourth (25%), the links were established by grandparents, parents, and other relatives. Parents were the only ancestors living in the current

261 Lewicka 2011.

place of living of every sixth respondent (17.6%) and other relations for every seventh (13.9%). Just one in twenty declared only grandparents lived in the same village (4.8%), and every fiftieth reported parents and other relatives (1.7%).

The attachment to a place felt by people who had lived there for a long time, both individually and across generations, could be relevant to quality of life. Long residence in a single place builds stability and familiarity. It also strengthens identity and local community ties. Studies from other parts of Europe reported idyllic perceptions of places among their long-term residents.²⁶²

Research on urban life satisfaction often investigates satisfaction with available services and fulfilment of needs.²⁶³ Although sometimes service accessibility satisfaction is considered a dimension of urban living standards,²⁶⁴ the impact of quality of life shaped by the urban environment on resident happiness is considered fundamental.²⁶⁵

Satisfaction with the place of living is, undoubtedly, linked to the perceived quality of infrastructure, transport, and local services, which are conditions and amenities not directly related to the household. Previous research in Poland has employed comparative measures of satisfaction, juxtaposing urban and rural residents²⁶⁶ to diagnose significant deficits in social services in the Polish countryside.²⁶⁷ In line with this standard, the present work offers a similar analysis.

The respondents rated several opportunities, services, or situations pertinent to rural quality of life.²⁶⁸ The most highly regarded were the state of the natural environment (4.24 on average), security (4.22), convenience stores (4.17), and cleanliness in public areas (4.14). The lowest ratings were allocated to public transport (2.83), care services for older people (2.74), and sports and educational services for older people (2.70).

Some respondents emphasised the unavailability of specific opportunities in their place of living. The highest levels of deficit were reported for sports and educational services for older people (32.4%), care services for older people (31.4%), and pharmacies (30.4%). Evidently, not only are opportunities targeting older people the most scarce, but they also received the lowest relative ratings.

Another interesting finding is that the rating of each aspect is positively correlated with satisfaction with the place of living. The higher the rating, the

262 van der Star / Hochstenbach 2022.

263 Winiarczyk-Raźniak 2008.

264 Piróg / Kotarski 2018.

265 Szołtysek 2018, p. 31.

266 Błoński / Burlita / Witek 2021.

267 Heffner / Klemens 2015.

268 A five-point scale was used (dissatisfied–satisfied).

higher the overall satisfaction with the place of living. The data with the ratings and relationships are summarised in Table 17.

Table 17. Satisfaction with opportunities, services, and situations in the village vs satisfaction with the place of living

| | Satisfaction [average of 1–5] | No opportunity [%] | Association between the aspect and satisfaction with the place of living |
|---|-------------------------------|--------------------|--|
| State of the environment | 4.24 | NA | 0.202* |
| Security level | 4.22 | NA | 0.193* |
| Convenience store | 4.17 | 15.4 | 0.200* |
| Cleanliness in public places (streets, playgrounds, forests, etc.) | 4.14 | NA | 0.200* |
| Pharmacies | 3.85 | 30.4 | 0.187* |
| Car repair, plumbing, electrician, etc. services | 3.78 | 15.8 | 0.218* |
| Child-care services | 3.5 | 26.3 | 0.230* |
| Out-of-school sports and education services for children and young people | 3.35 | 21.3 | 0.212* |
| Health care facilities | 3.21 | 26.3 | 0.198* |
| Cultural opportunities for all | 3.04 | 19.3 | 0.242* |
| Public transport | 2.83 | 12.0 | 0.208* |
| Care services for older people | 2.74 | 31.4 | 0.220* |
| Sports and educational services for older people | 2.7 | 32.4 | 0.206* |

Note: * statistically significant association: tau-b, for $p < 0.01$.

These results are consistent with other studies on quality of life in the Polish countryside: the overall subjective perception of quality of life satisfaction in the countryside is positive, with satisfaction with the state of the natural environment²⁶⁹ and security²⁷⁰ being the highest. Note further that the quality of the environment is reportedly among the primary motivators for moving from a city to the countryside.²⁷¹ Another interesting finding is satisfaction with health care facilities. Studies showed that satisfaction with health care is higher in rural areas.²⁷² The dimensions of dissatisfaction are somewhat different. The study clearly shows low satisfaction with public transport, which is consistent with

269 Bąk 2023.

270 Michalska-Żyła / Marks-Krzyszowska 2018.

271 Jończy / Śleszyński / Dolińska / Ptak Rokitowska-Malcher / Rokita-Poskart 2021.

272 Sompolska-Rzechuła / Kurdyś-Kujawska 2020, p. 651.

previous reports²⁷³. At the same time, the lowest level of satisfaction was assigned to services for older people. The most pronounced difference is between services for children and significantly worse opportunities for older people. Considering the ageing of the rural population in Poland, this insight is highly relevant to rural social policies.²⁷⁴

Satisfaction with the place of living can also be linked to economic, cultural, or social changes in the place and community. Rural residents in Poland generally appreciate agricultural activities, the construction of new houses and estates, and the settlement of new residents from cities. They express more reservations regarding new industrial facilities and new businesses in their villages. On the other hand, they do not welcome international immigrants seeking to reside in their villages.²⁷⁵

People living in a village generally exhibit the same attitude towards agricultural activity regardless of how long they have lived there. Those who come from the countryside are more open to new estates, industrial plants, and businesses. Individuals who have relocated to rural areas exhibit a more welcoming disposition towards newcomers from cities and immigrants who seek to live in the village (Tab. 18).

Table 18. Opinions on activities in the village. Differences between people originally from the countryside and cities

| Activity | Rating [average of 1–5] | | | Does not happen [%] |
|---|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------|
| | Total | People originating from rural areas | People originating from urban areas | |
| Agricultural activity | 3.85 | 3.86 | 3.83 | 7.8 |
| Construction of new houses and estates | 3.64 | 3.70* | 3.42* | 11.5 |
| Immigration from urban areas | 3.41 | 3.36* | 3.59* | 29.3 |
| Construction of industrial facilities, new businesses | 3.11 | 3.18* | 2.85* | 38.3 |
| Immigration from other countries | 2.33 | 2.23* | 2.69* | 37.4 |

Note: * statistically significant difference, Mann-Whitney test, for $p < 0.01$.

These results are interesting in the Polish context because the most disappreciated local change is population transition, namely a gradual rural depopulation.

273 Heffner / Klemens 2015; Michalska-Żyła / Marks-Krzyszowska 2018.

274 Stanny / Rosner 2024.

275 The respondents were asked to rate the phenomena or situations using a five-point scale with extremes labelled 1 – very disadvantageous and 5 – very advantageous.

tion²⁷⁶. One could tentatively conclude that although rural residents consider rural depopulation a serious problem, they are not for immigration to the countryside. Moreover, despite accepting traditional agricultural activities, people originating from the countryside and urban areas perceive investment projects differently. Migrants from cities can be more critical of such projects because they see the countryside as an idyllic contrast to the highly industrialised and densely populated city. For long-term rural residents, these projects are beneficial for their quality of life as they increase economic activity, and a low level of economic activity is often considered a driver of rural dissatisfaction.²⁷⁷ Note also that rural residents were usually less satisfied with the developmental potential of their place than urban residents.²⁷⁸ Therefore, the results can be interpreted as a sign of tension between the urge to preserve local identity and the imperative to open up to projects from third parties and the influx of new residents.

The opinion of the place of living is linked to the readiness to move out in one to five years. Those who declared readiness to move rated their satisfaction with the place of living at 3.53, while those who intended to stay were more satisfied (4.41). The difference is statistically significant (Mann-Whitney test, for $p < 0.01$). Every tenth respondent was willing to relocate (10.5%). Similar patterns were identified in studies on quality of life in European rural (and urban) areas. Those who planned to migrate from the countryside reported being less satisfied with their place of living, primarily because of poor access to well-paid and prestigious jobs.²⁷⁹ In this context, the intention to relocate from the place of living can be considered a negative indicator of satisfaction with the quality of life there.²⁸⁰ Notably, the most common migration vector was another village (36.3%) or a city with more than 100 thousand inhabitants (34.5%). Towns with up to 10 thousand inhabitants and cities with up to 100 thousand inhabitants were less popular (11.3% and 9.5%, respectively). Every twelfth person who declared readiness to relocate could not name the preferred destination (8.3%). Therefore, migration might not always indicate dissatisfaction with rural life *per se* but with living in a specific village. However, it is important to bear in mind that migration may not be linked to quality of life at all and may instead be driven by other factors.

When the respondents planned to move home, it was usually not far. The most common destination was another district within the same voivodeship (38.1%). Every fourth of those who wanted to move chose a different voivodeship (23.2%), and one-tenth would go abroad (11.9%) or to a different village within the same municipality (9.5%). Nearly 6% would move to a different location within the

276 Kajdanek / Latocha / Sikorski / Tomczak / Szmytkie/ Miodońska 2022.

277 Michalska-Żyła / Marks-Krzyszowska 2018.

278 Sompolska-Rzechuła / Kurdyś-Kujawska 2020, p. 651.

279 Vaishar / Vidovićová / Figueiredo 2018.

280 Caso / Carling / Hagen-Zanker / Vargas-Silva 2023.

same village. The remaining 11.9% could not specify their future preferred place of living. Longitudinal studies in Poland revealed a negative relationship between subjective happiness and readiness to migrate, with economic factors rather than satisfaction with the place of living driving migration plans.²⁸¹

It is impossible to unambiguously ascertain the motivation of people who intend to move under the discussed study. One emerging pattern is higher levels of pessimism regarding perceived opportunities for pursuing diverse needs and objectives when living in the countryside.²⁸² In general, all respondents were relatively optimistic about access to good education and opportunities to attain life goals, achieve a satisfying level of living, pursue skills and interests, find a satisfying job, and affect municipal authorities. The only aspect rated much lower than the others was the influence on central authorities. Still, those who declared the intention to move out rated every aspect significantly lower. Therefore, their opinions clearly suggest disappointment with the countryside or a failure to appreciate the potential opportunities it offers (Tab. 19).

Table 19. Opinions on rural opportunities by people planning to stay and move out [mean of a 1–5 scale]

| Opinion on rural opportunities to... | Total | People intending to stay | People intending to relocate |
|--|-------|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| obtain good education | 3.91 | 3.97* | 3.53* |
| attain personal goals | 3.73 | 3.78* | 3.44* |
| reach a satisfactory level of living | 3.7 | 3.74* | 3.48* |
| improve one's skills and work on hobbies | 3.59 | 3.64* | 3.21* |
| find a satisfactory job | 3.34 | 3.38* | 3.02* |
| affect municipal authorities | 3.11 | 3.17* | 2.77* |
| affect central authorities | 2.03 | 2.07* | 1.88* |

Note: * statistically significant difference, Mann-Whitney test, for $p < 0.05$.

Although the question is not directly related to the capabilities approach methodology, it aligns with the subjective assessment of capabilities available to individuals. Overall, the rural residents considered rural areas to offer favourable opportunities to pursue specific needs. The highest-rated opportunity concerned opportunities to obtain good education (3.91), which indicates that barriers in this domain have been overcome (corresponding well with the relatively high opinions on educational services for children discussed above). The

281 Brzozowski / Coniglio 2021.

282 The respondents were asked to evaluate opportunities the countryside offers to residents to achieve specific goals on a five-point scale with extremes described as 1: minimal opportunities and 5: maximal opportunities.

high rating of the opportunity to pursue one's goals (3.73) is just as important. It is a central quality of life factor, which reflects a person's chances to realise their aspirations and potential.²⁸³ The opportunity to reach a satisfactory level of living (3.7) was also evaluated as relatively good. This aspect determines access to resources and ways to ensure material and mental well-being.²⁸⁴ Opportunities to work on one's skills and interests were judged slightly lower (3.59). These are central to quality of life because of the links to self-actualisation, mental well-being, and fulfilment.²⁸⁵ Access to a satisfactory job (3.34) affects quality of life by providing livelihood, improving self-worth and perceived competence, and helping with social integration.²⁸⁶ The lowest rating was given to the issue of residents' influence on decisions taken by municipal and central authorities (3.11 and 2.03, respectively). Despite relatively high opinions on the opportunities to address one's needs in rural settings, the results are consistent with other publications, suggesting the need to consider investments in social infrastructure and mechanisms for empowering local communities.²⁸⁷ The negative perceptions of civic participation are reflected in studies on the rural quality of life in Poland,²⁸⁸ but the issue of civic engagement is discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

2.7 Summary

European-level studies show greater life satisfaction among rural residents than in cities, including in Poland. In addition, after Poland joined the European Union, its development accelerated. It is particularly evident in improving living standards and gradually upgrading infrastructure, services, and their availability to rural populations. European funds were spent on expensive hard infrastructure projects in the countryside, but they also fuelled many programmes to encourage citizen activity. Furthermore, the Common Agricultural Policy was a source of direct money transfers to farmers. Despite changes in the employment structure in rural areas, agriculture remains a vital labour market, making the countryside a beneficiary of the Common Agricultural Policy.

Even though living standards and the financial standing of households in the countryside have improved, rural areas still fall behind in terms of access, infrastructure, and development opportunities. Still, the rural labour market is changing as new sectors, such as tourism, gain footing.

283 Diener / Suh / Lucas / Smith 1999.

284 Cummins 2000.

285 Ryan / Deci 2001.

286 Warr 1999.

287 Woźniak / Woźniak / Chrzanowski / Ostasz 2015.

288 Michalska-Żyła / Marks-Krzyszowska 2018.

All these changes affect the rural quality of life both in terms of objective living standards and subjective perceptions. Hence the value of diagnosing the perception.

The study demonstrates that members of the Polish rural population:

1. are satisfied with life and the place of living, especially regarding living standards and conditions in the place of living;
2. are attached to the place of living. The level of attachment varies according to the generation and available capital. A higher strength of attachment was found in older, less educated, and poorer people and those from rural background or whose families have lived in the countryside for generations;
3. appreciate the condition of the natural environment, security, and cleanliness but perceived care, sports, and educational services for older people and public transport as below par, which affects their satisfaction with the place of living;
4. vary in their opinions on changes in the village. They express appreciation for new houses and estates and value agriculture but hold greater scepticism towards new industrial facilities and migrants;
5. intend to migrate for various reasons. However, only one in ten plans to move out, mainly to another village or city. Their migration plans are often linked to poor perceived opportunities to pursue life goals in rural areas;
6. have the necessary amenities at home: infrastructure (toilet, central heating, or municipal water supply) and media access (Internet and TV);
7. are locally active, mostly in handicrafts, culinary arts, and agritourism, but more often merely observe their neighbours engage in these activities;
8. recognise the deficit of care services for older people and yet are unwilling to run a care farm (only one in twenty would consider it).

Quality of life is shaped by multiple material and social factors. The relatively high level of satisfaction with the place of living among the rural population is a good sign. Still, there are many challenges, like access to labour markets, improvement of public services, or the public's impact on decision-making.

The study identified a problem of the rural service market not being adapted to demographic transitions, especially to population ageing and depopulation. Even though the survey responses indicate improvements in access to care, educational, and sports services for children and youth, opportunities for older people are much worse. Considering that rural residents are not open to migrants, the future demand for services targeting children and youth is uncertain. Although population ageing challenges will affect all types of municipalities, they will be the central problem for rural quality of life. The situation is even worse in the face of deruralisation and the emigration of young populations to cities. As a result, seniors may soon dominate the population structure of many villages.

Chapter III.

Social capital of the Polish rural population

3.1 Theoretical background of social capital

The term ‘social capital’ brings together two words of Latin origin: *socius* (comrade, partner, ally) and *capita* (head). This etymology reveals the essence of one of the most popular social and economic sciences catchphrases of the recent decades.²⁸⁹

Concepts of social capital emphasise that the benefits of this form of capital emerge not from individual calculations and actions, as is the case with financial capital, but from social relationships. These relationships come as partnerships, sociability, or cooperation within a community in a broader sense. The fundamental conceptual and empirical assumption about social capital boils down to the simple phrase ‘social relationships matter’. By building and maintaining relationships, people facilitate collaboration, leading to tangible benefits. Individual’s actions and efforts alone could not achieve these profits, or the cost of energy would be incommensurate.²⁹⁰

The popularity of the assumption has led to the search for its benefits in a broader range of social phenomena, from microscale to macroscale. As a result, social capital was studied as the driving factor of educational achievements,²⁹¹ health and quality of life,²⁹² community functioning and development,²⁹³ economic and institutional development of countries,²⁹⁴ and democratisation and quality of state institutions.²⁹⁵

As the idea of social capital grew in popularity, it also attracted criticism. Sceptics and opponents emphasised that the concept is employed as a foundation

289 Field 2008; Fine 2008; Ostrom / Ahn 2009; Portes 1998.

290 Field 2008, p. 1.

291 Coleman / Hoffer 1987; Hagan / MacMillan / Wheaton 1996.

292 Kawachi et al. 1997; Kawachi et al 1999; Helliwell / Putnam 2004.

293 Dekker / Uslaner 2001; Grootaert / Bastelaer 2002; Narayan / Pritchett 1999.

294 Knack / Keefer 1997; La Porta et al. 1997.

295 Badescu / Uslaner 2003; Paxton 2002; Putnam / Leonardi / Nonetti 1993.

for investigating various phenomena in multiple contexts, which deprives it of a distinct meaning.²⁹⁶ Moreover, it has become a chaotic notion due to its conceptual and practical multidimensionality and multitude of aspects, leading to definitional blurring.²⁹⁷

Undeniably, the academic discourse has gained a notion whose initial meaning was metaphorical or figurative. Lyda J. Hanifan, believed to have coined the term ‘social capital’,²⁹⁸ accentuated the distinction between the ownership or money and real values relevant to everyday life and embodied as good faith, brotherhood, compassion, and social coexistence. It is thanks to this capital that a community spirit can emerge, allowing its members to collaborate.²⁹⁹ The pivotal question those who sought to develop the concept of social capital had to address concerned the way these values are capitalised and how to measure the profits they yield. In other words, what is being invested, and what the benefits of the investment are.

The appreciation of the immanent value of human collaboration, along with the framing of its causes and effects in ‘capital’ terms, led to social capital itself being associated with characteristics of other forms of capital. The social capital boom followed from the development of neocapitalist economic theories, which highlighted the impact of intangible means of production as opposed to classical theories, where capital goods determined development. Not only were these intangible resources at the disposal of individuals, but they were also inherent to them.

Lindon J. Robinson, Allan A. Schmid, and Marcelo E. Siles justify the assumption that social capital is similar to other types of capital.³⁰⁰ In their definition, social capital ‘is a person’s or group’s sympathy³⁰¹ toward another person or group that may produce a potential benefit, advantage, and preferential treatment for another person or group of persons beyond that expected in an exchange relationship.’³⁰² These authors describe physical (or financial) capital

296 Portes 1998, p. 2.

297 Fine 2010, p. 5.

298 Dario Castiglione 2008, pp. 178–181 offers food for thought regarding social capital. These are: 1) the most obvious tradition founded on ‘classics of the concept’, P. Bourdieu, J. Coleman, and R.D. Putnam, 2) the tradition drawing on the empirical research by Alexis de Tocqueville on nineteenth-century American democracy, 3) the tradition of Ferdinand Tönnies and his distinction between the community (*Gemeinschaft*) and society (*Gesellschaft*), and 4) the liberal tradition of Adam Smith with the ‘invisible hand’, complemented with additional moral deliberations.

299 Hanifan 1920, pp. 9–10, 79.

300 Robinson /Schmid / Siles 2002.

301 The word ‘sympathy’ as used here is a reference to Adam Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, where the author writes ‘sympathy (...) does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites it’ (2002, p. 15).

302 Robinson /Schmid / Siles 2002, p. 4.

with several characteristics: 1) capacity to transform things into other things, 2) durability in time, 3) flexibility to achieve various kinds of benefits, 4) substitutability and complementarity so that one objective can be achieved through various means, 5) decay/maintenance through the use, time, conservation, 6) reliability of a good or service being produced as expected, 7) ability to create other capital, 8) investment/disinvestment opportunities, and 9) alienability. The authors maintain that these characteristics pertain to social capital as well.

Social capital can be (1) transformed through sympathy to meet economic, social, informational, or validation needs. Its (2) durability over time varies depending on the type of social relationships. Blood ties are an example of a more durable form (often indestructible), while relationships with random acquaintances are much less durable. Then, the same social relationships can yield (3) different benefits: lending money, gaining information, satisfying affiliation needs, or being praised or rewarded. Social capital can be (4) substitutive and complementary regarding needs that have to be satisfied. It can ensure more effective control, motivation, more satisfying emotional support, etc. On the one hand, social capital can be (5) destroyed (when social relationships lack reciprocity or direct in-person contact), but on the other hand, it can be reinforced by frequent interactions with community members. Sometimes, social capital (6) guarantees returns when one knows what to expect of others with whom one has a relationship. Reciprocity and trust, which are part of social relationships, reinforce confidence. Social capital can also be used to (7) generate other forms of capital. A group of friends may start a business in a joint effort, share knowledge or experience, or motivate each other to lead a healthy lifestyle. Each such activity brings them specific profits in the form of different types of capital (financial profits, improved qualifications, or better health). One can also (8) purposefully invest in social capital, whether expecting specific benefits or not. The magnitude of the 'invested capital' is linked to the intensity of social relationships and, at times, the energy invested in others. Finally, social capital is (9) alienable, just like physical capital. Social capital generated by family members or friends can be 'inherited', or others may be 'authorised' to use it. Recommendations or connections paving the way to other social groups are one example of sharing access to social capital.

These processes need components critical for social capital: social networks with their resources, norms, and values.

Networks and resources create the structure of social capital. Nan Lin has thoroughly explored the structural perspective, which presents the essence of social capital by combining the 'static' component (social networks and re-

sources) with ‘dynamic’ elements (individuals’ actions leading to maintaining or obtaining resources from the social network).³⁰³

Lin defines social capital as ‘resources embedded in a social structure which are accessed and/or mobilised in purposive actions.’³⁰⁴ It is defined in relation to 1) the quantity and/or quality of resources that an actor (be it an individual or a group or community) can access or use through 2) its position in a social network.³⁰⁵ Why resources in social networks³⁰⁶ improve the effectiveness of actions can be explained in several ways.³⁰⁷

First, social networks facilitate the flow of information. Useful information about various options for pursuing an objective and opportunities to attain it reduces transaction costs (generated by high risk), which would be higher were it not for the information. Information can spread in social networks through informal channels, during general conversations, in a fragmented form, and without apparent expectations regarding its usefulness. Interestingly, such an exchange of information does not necessarily have to be aimless. Obviously, most of such stream of information has no specific effect, but a routine transfer may lead to the interlocutor showing interest in the situation and responding to it.³⁰⁸

Second, social ties enable those in strategic positions within social networks to steer individuals. Such positions give access to more valuable resources, leading to more influence.³⁰⁹

Third, social ties can provide a way to validate someone’s references or qualifications by the mere association of some individuals with others (social credentials). Such standing behind is an indication to others that the individual may have access to resources other than their individual capital.

Fourth, social relationships reinforce the sense of identity and affirmation. They reflect the dignity (value) of the individual as a member of a group of other individuals with similar resources and objectives (reinforcement). They provide emotional support (improving mental health) and certify to others the individual’s right to use the resources.³¹⁰

Social network resources come in two variants: personal and social. Personal resources can be tangible assets (such as land, buildings, and money) or figurative resources (including education, club memberships, honorary titles, aca-

303 Lin 1999, 2001, 2004, 2008.

304 Lin 1999, p. 35.

305 Lin 2000, p. 786.

306 Later, Nan Lin defines social capital as ‘resources embedded in social networks accessed and used by actors for actions’ (2004, p. 25).

307 Lin 2004, p. 20.

308 Lin / Ao 2008, p. 133.

309 Lin 2001, p. 20.

310 Ibidem.

demic degrees, respect, repute, or fame). They can be acquired by inheritance or attribution, investment of own resources or effort, and through exchange. Some personal resources can be possessed ‘completely’, so a person can dispose of them at will (such as money, qualifications, and experience). Some personal resources are positional. Their possession follows from the person’s position in the social structure. The person has access to the resources and may use them only during the contract term (such as an ownership title or employment contract).³¹¹ Social resources are those accessed through social relationships with other individuals. Social capital includes resources (wealth, power, repute, and social networks) of other actors that the individual can access through direct or indirect social ties.³¹²

The hierarchical social structures of today promote interactions between actors on the same or adjacent tiers (homophilous interactions). Interactions are driven by two factors. On the one hand, actors strive to preserve and defend the resources they possess, and on the other hand, they seek to obtain additional resources. The first motive gives rise to expressive actions, while the other evokes instrumental actions.³¹³ Expressive actions provide three types of benefits to the individual: physical health (useful physical competencies and protection against illness or injury), mental health (stress resilience and cognitive and emotional balance), life satisfaction (optimism and contentment with various domains such as family, marriage, work, and community). Instrumental actions bring economic, political (hierarchical standing), and social benefits in the form of reputation (positive or negative perception of the individual in the social network).³¹⁴

Expressive actions are more likely to succeed when the actors share basic sociodemographic and lifestyle characteristics, which implies strong social ties. Such actors employ similar social resources for expressive actions because of the status similarities. To be successful, an instrumental action requires a diversity of social resources possessed by actors with various sociodemographic characteristics and statuses. The critical factor for instrumental actions is weak social ties.³¹⁵

According to Mark Granovetter, four factors determine the strength of social ties, which are considered symmetric (reciprocated) and positive (favourable). These are the amount of time the individuals devote to each other, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (propensity to confide in one another), and reciprocal help. Strong ties play a role in sociopsychological activities, while weak ties are

311 Lin 2004, pp. 21, 42–43.

312 Ibidem, p. 43.

313 Ibidem, pp. 56–59.

314 Lin 1999, p. 40.

315 Lin 1986, pp. 27–28.

potential opportunities for links (bridges) between the actor and other circles or social networks. They favour increased mobility and streamline access to useful information (for example, job opportunities). Hence the importance of the strength of weak ties highlighted by Mark Granovetter.³¹⁶

To retain possession of resources, the individual has to establish links with other individuals, thus protecting their current resources and obtaining new ones. Resources can be retained and protected through emotional or expressive factors, while attainment requires instrumental actions. As a result, horizontal (homophilous) and vertical (heterophilous) interactions and relationships build elementary forms of social structure. The structure gives access to resources the individual might not have. The diversity of skills in managing and manipulating social capital among actors leads to hierarchical positions.³¹⁷

The specificity of interactions between individuals depends on structural parameters, but even more so on cognitive, consciousness-based foundations that guide actions. This determines the substance of norms and values inherent to the institutional order of the specific society. The latter emerges from interaction patterns and taboos people develop, or, put simply, it reflects how the game is played.³¹⁸

Efforts to mobilise or acquire social capital follow universal rules derived from the objectives of individuals in specific positions in the social structure and social network. The diversity and complexity of routinised social relationships call for principles of recognition and legitimisation. They validate the fundamental right to human capital (ownership) and simultaneously specify the importance of responsibility and recognition for actors contributing resources to the network of interactions.³¹⁹

Because of these mechanisms, reflected in the cultural patterns specific to a given community, social capital must not be considered solely in the context of structural factors. They are, indeed, inseparable from such cultural elements as expectations, trust, or obligations. Individuals absorb these cultural components of social capital, but the components are not the individuals' attributes. By being part of larger communities, individuals internalise norms and values as added value. Through this value, social capital becomes available to individuals who identify with each other by participating in groups or abstract communities. This sociocultural component of social capital provides a specific context reaching beyond relationships between individuals. It also provides a foundation for

316 Granovetter 1982, pp. 1361, 1372–1373.

317 Lin 2004, p. 179.

318 North 1990, p. 3.

319 Lin 2004, p. 137.

understanding the relationships and sets rules for individual and collective actions.³²⁰

The potential benefits an individual derives from being physically present in a social network depend on the collective expectations formed among its members and on the intensity of their influence on the collective's activities. Alejandro Portes and Julia Sensenbrenner³²¹ identified four types of such expectations (sources of social capital): value introjection, reciprocity transactions/exchange, bounded solidarity, and enforceable trust. They enable individuals to obtain benefits from being part of social networks or other social structures.³²²

Value introjection takes place during socialisation and results in a consensus regarding the introduced values. Thanks to introjection, the group is not dominated by individualistic behaviour aimed at pursuing egocentric interests (naked greed), which makes way for socially acceptable behaviour.

Reciprocity transactions are not processes that lead to a higher level of group morality. Instead, they help pursue selfish ends. However, the exchange does not have to concern money or material goods. It may also involve intangible values like favours, information, and approval. It shapes reciprocity norms as the basis for direct interactions accompanied by a general belief that all community members make comparable contributions to the pool of resources (such as time, knowledge, skills, or funds).

Bounded solidarity leads to activities based on shared and acceptable principles and then to the orientation towards a common interest. If group norms are strong enough, the group members are inclined to support each other, and the reciprocity principle becomes part of their individual pursuits or goals.

The role of enforceable trust is to guarantee that a favour (part of an exchange process) for other group members elicits equivalent compensation (return of favour) and that the way it is provided is accepted by the group. Thanks to the trust norm, the beneficiary has easier access to resources, and the benefactor can approve the terms of the exchange and streamline it. When the group is guided by enforceable trust, the repayment does not necessarily have to come directly from the beneficiary. It may take the form of status, honour, or approval from the group as a whole. What is more, the collective is the guarantor that all and any debts are repaid.

The social capital emerging from the simultaneous influences of the four rules is generated by the alignment of individual members' beliefs with group norms. In this case, the motivating factor is the predicted functional usefulness of particular values that emerges from their group approval rather than the conviction

320 Edwards / Foley 1997, pp. 670–671.

321 Portes / Sensenbrenner 1993; Portes 1998.

322 Portes 1998.

of the validity of these values themselves. Utilitarianism is the dominant strategy in that case. Still, it is not directed at individual actors but at the group as a whole.³²³

In summary, the structural elements that are the instruments of social capital are complemented by cultural (contextual) elements. It is through them that the instruments can be used, and used easily, in social networks or structures to attain specific benefits. Therefore, social capital has a cognitive and structural dimension.³²⁴

This two-pronged approach is employed to analyse the social capital of the Polish rural population. The first, cognitive, dimension provides a framework for characterising generalised trust as a cultural resource of rural communities and the values their members share. The other dimension plays the same role in depicting the informal and formal rural social networks. Informal social networks (family, neighbours, friends) provide platforms for expressive actions because they can generate various forms of internal social support. This analysis focuses on the bonding type of social capital. Formal networks are analysed through the associational activities of the rural population. This analysis puts the bridging form of social capital in the centre. The assumption here is that access to members of social networks other than the individual's improves access to resources employed to pursue instrumental goals. In other words, it paves the way to new resources.

3.2 Social trust and values

Broadly speaking, trust can be perceived from three perspectives as a property that is an individual, relational, or cultural 'resource'.

In light of the first approach, typical of social psychology, trust is a kind of 'personality trait'³²⁵ formed in early childhood. It stays with the individual and changes only slightly due to personal experience. This trust is part of a broader combination of personality traits, which includes optimism, faith in collaboration, and the belief that one's problems can be successfully addressed, leading to a satisfying life.³²⁶ This form of trust is also referred to as thick or personal trust. It is strongest in small communities where people know each other personally, and trustworthy behaviour is reinforced by social sanctions enforceable through the close relationships among the members.³²⁷

323 Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993, p. 1325.

324 Uphoff 1999.

325 Sztompka 2003, p. 65.

326 Delhey / Newton 2003, p. 95.

327 Delhey / Newton 2004, p. 3.

In the framework of the second approach, stemming from the rational choice theory, trust is a ‘tool’ or ‘commodity’³²⁸ used in transactional relationships: ‘I trust you because it is in your interest to do what I trust you to do.’³²⁹ Eric Uslaner calls it ‘strategic trust’. It helps resolve problems linked to joint effort by reducing transactional costs paid for the required information. This type of trust is based on knowledge.³³⁰ It entails the risk of the decision whether or not to engage in an action. The primary motive for the decision is to maximise profits and minimise losses.³³¹ Regarding this form of trust, consider the insight from Margaret Levi³³² that the opposite of trust defined in this way is lack of trust rather than distrust because it cannot be good or bad in and of itself. This type of trust is a peculiar faith rooted not in evidence but in a lack of counter-evidence. On an individual scale, this trust determines the chance of achieving social recognition, well-being, power, or competitive advantage.³³³

Regarding the third, cultural approach, ‘trust appears as neither a calculated orientation, nor a psychological propensity, but a cultural rule.’³³⁴ It is referred to as generalised trust, which is only partially linked to one’s experience. At its core, ‘most people can be trusted’ because they belong to the same moral community. In simplest terms, generalised trust is grounded in the faith in the goodness of human nature, a faith not concerning specific entities (individuals or organisations) but their collective.³³⁵ Generalised trust demonstrates a potential willingness to cooperate and an abstract readiness to engage in joint endeavours. Attitudes based on generalised trust transcend the boundaries of direct interactions and are formed in relation to strangers. So they concern persons outside of the circle of family, friends or acquaintances, where personal—instead of general—trust is at play.³³⁶

Generalised trust is founded on moral trust. The difference lies in that moral trust emerges from shared values, which tend to be constant. How these values are interpreted, however, depends on everyday experience, so generalised trust tends to be more variable. Therefore, generalised trust is moral trust in the real world; it is not as solid, universal, and reliable.³³⁷ Shared values fuel the moral community, which provides a framework for individuals to define themselves as ‘we’. People build the community following a conviction that other members of

328 Dasgupta 1988.

329 Hardin 1992, p. 153.

330 Uslaner 2002, p. 17.

331 Coleman 1990, pp. 61, 99.

332 Levi 1998, p. 81.

333 Braithwaite 1998, p. 49.

334 Sztompka 2003, p. 66.

335 Yamagishi / Yamagishi 1994, p. 139.

336 Stolle 2002, p. 397.

337 Uslaner 2002, pp. 21, 27–28.

the collective can be trusted to be loyal and put the community's interest over their particular interest. These three pieces make up moral ties that link individuals in the social space.³³⁸

Moral trust is underpinned by the belief that others share one's fundamental moral values and will be treated just like one would wish to be treated by them. Note that trust in others does not require unanimity regarding essential political, ideological, or life philosophy matters. On the contrary, it embodies tolerance of various ideas and appreciation of the fact that people are bound by specific universal values. Interestingly, treating others as part of one's moral community may take different forms in different societies.³³⁹

Every moral community, regardless of its ethical principles, generates some degree of trust among its members. Francis Fukuyama proposed a metaphor of the radius of trust, the range of which depends on the share of community representatives who follow principles of fairness, kindness, and generosity.³⁴⁰

The level of personal trust fluctuates as diverse life experiences, activity contexts, and random factors modulate it. When individuals' experiences, underpinned by moral values, grow similar, and particular operating strategies become universal and widespread, trust turns into a collective feature, a cultural pattern specific to the entire community.³⁴¹ In this context, generalised trust can be considered an indicator of social stability, integration, and peace.³⁴² Therefore, 'trust or suspicion can become "social facts" as defined by Emil Durkheim, shared by members of a larger community, external to each of them, and forcing them to orient themselves towards others. At this point, trust or distrust is seen as a social rule rather than a personal routine, a normative expectation instead of an individual's propensity'.³⁴³

Generalised trust is fuelled by the universal knowledge about the members of society, the motives that drive them, and their upbringing.³⁴⁴ Without generalised trust between people, society would disintegrate because too few relationships are founded solely on what is known for sure about others. Not many interpersonal relationships would stand if trust were not as strong as or even stronger than rational evidence or personal insights.³⁴⁵

In a summary of his research, Julian B. Rotter points out the positive link between trust and characteristics of social life in general. The link emerges be-

338 Sztompka 2002, p. 187.

339 Uslaner 2008, p. 103.

340 Fukuyama 1995, p. 36.

341 Fukuyama 1995; Offe 1999; Putnam 2000.

342 Delhey / Newton 2004, p. 5.

343 Sztompka 2002, p. 315.

344 Durlauf / Fafchamps 2004, p. 9.

345 Simmel 2005, pp. 178–179.

cause people who trust others more are simultaneously less likely to lie, cheat, or steal themselves. They are also more inclined to give second chances and respect others' rights. Moreover, trusting people are happier, less antagonistic, and better adapted to society. This makes them more likeable and better candidates for friends (of persons exhibiting both high and low levels of trust). Importantly, trusting persons are not more gullible (naive or likely to misstep) than distrustful individuals.³⁴⁶

Generalised trust is particularly relevant in modern societies, where consensus, pragmatism, problem-solving, technocratic knowledge, and conflict-management skills are considered essential. All these aspects make up a society based on interwoven networks of trust. Networks between citizens, families, volunteer organisations, denominations, civic associations, etc.³⁴⁷ Indeed, modern institutions heavily rely on trust in abstract systems guided by expert knowledge. These systems, based on extensive expert knowledge, organise virtually the entire material and social human environment. They are represented by 'professionals', such as doctors, lawyers, architects, etc. The layman's reliance on expert systems is not only about ensuring security in an independent universe of events. It is also a matter of risk-benefit weighing, where expert knowledge is not only a basis for the calculations but actually (re-) creates the universe of events by constantly and reflexively implementing the knowledge. Hence, the reliability of the experts or their representatives and their trust in them appear to be central characteristics of modern societies.³⁴⁸

From the macro-social point of view, generalised trust can spread among strangers only if the political system is perceived as neutral. It means everyone is treated equally with no preferences, prejudice, or discriminative or limited access to the system. It must accept differences among people without any legal ramifications of the differentiation.³⁴⁹ If representatives of various social groups are aware of unequal treatment (exclusion, discrimination, corruption, etc.) by representatives of institutions established to implement and enforce principles of equality, they will certainly come to obvious conclusions. If the representatives cannot be trusted, other people are not trustworthy either.³⁵⁰ This top-down perspective indicates that generalised trust stems, among others, from the opinion on the institutional order, intensity of social conflicts, sense of subjectivity, or political freedom.³⁵¹

346 Rotter 1980.

347 Seligman 2000, p. 14.

348 Giddens 1990, pp. 27, 83–84.

349 Offe 1999, pp. 74–75.

350 Rothstein / Stolle 2008, p. 284.

351 Delhey / Newton 2003, p. 99.

Empirical data confirm the link between trust and the quality of the socio-economic system. For instance, generalised trust is positively correlated with the effectiveness of the judicial system, tax law compliance, quality of bureaucratic organisations, civic activity, relative prosperity of large enterprises, neonatal mortality, educational achievements, GDP per capita,³⁵² gross enrolment ratio,³⁵³ democracy maturity, and well-being.³⁵⁴

Generalised trust is usually measured in surveys with the question ‘Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?’ The question was used for the first time by Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann in her public opinion poll in 1948 to characterise the condition of post-war German society. It was later repeated by Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba³⁵⁵ in their impactful work *The Civic Culture*, thanks to which it expanded globally³⁵⁶ as the metric of generalised trust.³⁵⁷

Generalised trust is a vital prerequisite for social network building, which determines access to social capital. Compared to other European countries, Poland has a relatively low level of generalised trust. It is positioned close to other ‘post-communist’ countries like Czechia, Slovenia, Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, and Albania.³⁵⁸

Results of the European Social Survey,³⁵⁹ demonstrate that the level of generalised trust in the general population was stable and low (with a clear-cut decline in the 2020 results). Over the two decades, the mean value of generalised trust in Poland, measured with an 11-point scale (0–10), ranged from 2.89 to 4.55. This means it did not exceed 5, the midpoint.

When place of living is considered, trust among the Polish rural population was below that of the general population in each consecutive ESS round. Rural populations were less trusting than residents of towns, cities, and suburbs (Fig. 3).

According to the Centre for Public Opinion Research,³⁶⁰ the generalised mistrust among Poles declined slightly in 2024. Still, nearly three-fourths of Poles

352 La Porta et al. 1997.

353 Knack / Keefer 1997.

354 Inglehart 1999; Paxton 2002.

355 Almond / Verba 1963/1989.

356 This wording of the question can be found in such publications as *American General Social Survey*, *the World Values Survey*, *Social Capital Benchmark Survey*, *the Citizenship Involvement and Democracy Survey*, *the European Social Survey*, *the Eurobarometer* (Achbari 2016, p. 5).

357 Zmerli / Newton / Montero 2007, pp. 38–39.

358 Masłyk 2021.

359 ESS 2024.

360 The Centre for Public Opinion Research is an institution conducting panel research on a representative sample of adult Poles.

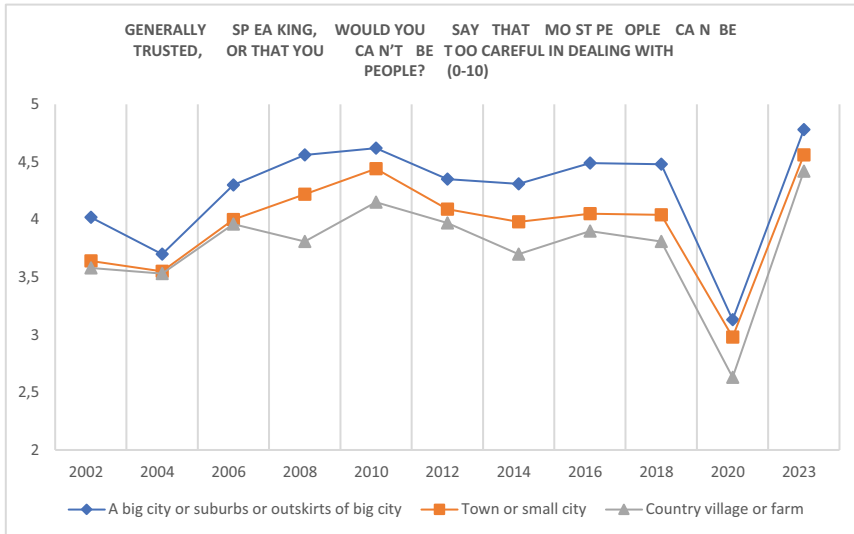


Figure 3. Generalised trust in Poland depending on place of living. Source: ESS 2002–2023.

believed that one cannot be too careful when dealing with people, and merely one-fourth believed that most people could be trusted.

Rural residents, people with lower education levels, lowest per capita income, and those who considered their financial situation as bad turned out to be the most distrustful. Better-educated respondents, university graduates, residents of the largest agglomerations, respondents in better financial standing with higher per capita income, and those who were satisfied with their financial situation were relatively more open and exhibited above-average levels of trust in others. The most distrustful professions were the unemployed, unskilled labourers, and farmers.³⁶¹

Also, most respondents in the authors' original research on Polish rural areas from 2024 expressed distrust towards others.³⁶² Every third interviewee (29.4%) believed most people could be trusted. Others were convinced caution was advised when dealing with others.

Basic sociodemographic characteristics are also associated with differences in trust levels. Women more often declare trust in others. Similarly, middle-aged respondents (45–59 years) are also more trusting than the youngest group (18–24 years) and young people (25–34 years). Regarding education, people with a university degree admitted to trusting the most often. It is also typical of married

³⁶¹ Cybulska, 2024, p. 6,15.

³⁶² The study measured generalised trust with a binary scale: 1 – most people can be trusted and 2 – you are never too careful when dealing with others.

people. Even though no significant disparities were found among people of different subjective levels of financial situation, those who consider themselves better off because they can satisfy more than just basic needs are slightly more trusting. Interestingly, the greater trust potential of urban populations over rural residents is evident when ‘native’ residents (at least second generation living in the countryside) are juxtaposed with recent migrants (the first generation). Residents with an urban background are more likely to trust others compared with people rooted in the rural environment. Details are provided in Table 20.

Table 20. Basic sociodemographics and generalised trust [%]

| Variables | | Most people can be trusted | You can't be too careful in dealing with people | Cramer's V |
|----------------|----------------|----------------------------|---|------------|
| Sex | female | 31.8 | 68.2 | 0.052* |
| | male | 27.0 | 73.0 | |
| Age | 18–24 | 20.3 | 79.7 | 0.125* |
| | 25–34 | 20.1 | 79.9 | |
| | 35–44 | 31.8 | 68.2 | |
| | 45–59 | 35.7 | 64.3 | |
| | 60 and older | 29.6 | 70.4 | |
| Education | primary | 28.0 | 72.0 | 0.099* |
| | vocational | 23.6 | 76.4 | |
| | secondary | 27.2 | 72.8 | |
| | post-secondary | 12.9 | 87.1 | |
| | higher | 33.8 | 66.2 | |
| Marital status | unmarried | 24.7 | 75.3 | 0.080** |
| | married | 31.5 | 68.5 | |
| | divorced | 18.3 | 81.7 | |
| | widowed) | 27.4 | 72.6 | |

(Continued)

| Variables | | Most people can be trusted | You can't be too careful in dealing with people | Cramer's V |
|--------------------------|---|----------------------------|---|------------|
| Financial standing | we can afford additional spending in addition to basic needs every month | 33.3 | 66.7 | NS |
| | we can afford additional spending in addition to basic needs from time to time | 28.8 | 71.2 | |
| | we're just covering our monthly expenses | 27.2 | 72.8 | |
| | sometimes, we don't have enough money to pay basic bills, such as rent or electricity | 23.1 | 76.9 | |
| | we haven't been able to pay basic bills, such as rent or electricity, for some time now | 26.7 | 73.3 | |
| Original place of living | rural | 26.3 | 73.7 | 0.125* |
| | urban | 40.1 | 59.9 | |

* statistically significant differences for $p < 0.05$, ** for $p < 0.01$.

Residents of rural areas differ regarding the assessment of trust in other agents representing particularised trust (known persons, close relationships) and institutional trust in institutions and their representatives.³⁶³ The respondents' judgements form typical trust dimensions, as expected.³⁶⁴ The first, interpersonal dimension covers immediate and extended family, neighbours, and colleagues. The second covers municipal administration, the EU, judiciary, and municipal authorities. The latter additionally participate in the third dimension, which includes churches (not only the dominant Catholic Church but also other denominations). The data illustrate the typical trust radius discussed above. Residents of rural areas trust their immediate family the most. Next, follow the extensive family, neighbours, and colleagues. More people declared trust than distrust in those four categories. These results are not surprising and have not changed for years. As noted by Piotr Sztompka, an eminent Polish sociologist

363 The respondents shared their opinions using five-point scales with the following categories: 1 – definitely do not trust, 2 – probably do not trust, 3 – unsure about trusting, 4 – probably trust, 5 – definitely trust

364 The 'trust dimensions' were identified based on factor loading from a principal component analysis with promax rotation and Kaiser normalisation. The highlighted dimensions explained 63.3% of the variance of the analysed variables in aggregate: 35.7%, 15.8%, and 11.8%, respectively. KMO=0.767, Bartlett test significance < 0.001.

and trust theory expert, when considered as a bet on the reliability of others, trust is the highest in primary groups whose members one knows well. Knowledge of their life history, personality, habits, customs, and routines contributes to low expected unpredictability of their behaviour. In other words, when one knows a person with whom they have a close relationship and the context in which they operate, one trusts them and considers their actions reliable.³⁶⁵ Actions by extended family, neighbours, and colleagues seem less reliable, although the trust level is still relatively high in this case compared to complete strangers.

The culture of distrust, found in rural areas and in Polish society in general, is rooted in the country's history. As Piotr Sztompka emphasises, a trust or distrust culture emerges from a process that can be analysed only in a broad historical context. According to his theory, a culture of trust is promoted by five macro-social factors. Five of their antitheses advance the culture of distrust.

The first factor is normative coherence (opposed by normative chaos or anomie as proposed by Durkheim). If enforced, social norms, including legal principles, make social life predictable, safer, and more orderly by indicating what people should do and refrain from doing. The sense of security promotes bets that express trust. Sztompka believes that norms like reliability, loyalty, and reciprocity increase the partner's probability of meeting their transaction obligations, caring for goods they receive, and returning the trust. He adds that it does pay to trust and be reliable in a world without norms. It is at this point that in friends and family with whom one shares destiny becomes severed from the trust in strangers who could pose an actual threat.³⁶⁶

The second macrosocial factor of the culture of trust is the stability of the social order. According to Sztompka, a stable social order provides a sound point of reference for social life, promotes a sense of security, and helps routinise everyday activities, which makes others' behaviour predictable. Notably, a social change does not curb social trust as long as it is gradual, predictable, and legitimised. Periods of rapid and radical social change generate instability, social anxiety, and suspicion, which encourages withdrawal of trust.³⁶⁷

The third macro-social promotor of the culture of trust is the transparency of society's organisation, defined as access to information on how it functions. The information reinforces trust in institutions and organisations, making their activity logical and coherent. If it is unclear or difficult to grasp how they operate, conspiracy theories and rumours begin. Consequently, people reluctantly invest their trust in institutions.³⁶⁸

365 Sztompka 2007, p. 104.

366 Sztompka 2007, p. 276.

367 Sztompka 2007, p. 277.

368 Sztompka 2007, p. 278.

The fourth driver of the culture of trust is the familiarity of the surroundings, especially the immediate vicinity, which fosters a sense of security and predictability of the world around the individual. Sztompka employs this factor to account for the popularity of international hotel or restaurant chains as they guarantee the same well-known accommodation and food standards as at home.³⁶⁹

The last factor of the culture of trust is the accountability of others and institutions. It reduces the risk of ad hoc, unjustified, or arbitrary actions at variance with social order. This way, people believe that departures from the norm can be resolved in a court of law, for example, that is impartial and issues decisions based on law.³⁷⁰

These five factors of the culture of trust were missing throughout the history of Poland (to various degrees). The first event to be mentioned here is the Partitions, the 123 years when the country was divided into three distinct socio-economic systems. After Poland regained independence in 1918, the state faced the challenge of unifying the land both politically and socially. The transformation was interrupted by the outbreak of the Second World War. It was yet another period of anomie after the First World War. It involved chaotic activities of individuals and groups who felt lost and unsure. It stimulated distrust in strangers who could be agents, traitors, or informers. After the Second World War, Poland again lost its independence and was subjugated by the USSR. It was a time of propaganda, public opinion manipulation, and conspiracy theories about such matters as hostile actions by the West. Residents of rural areas still remember stories of American planes allegedly dropping the Colorado potato beetle on potato fields. At that time, Poles were even deprived of a sense of familiarity with their surroundings because the security service could have agents and informants anywhere, even among family, friends, acquaintances, or neighbours. Denunciation was widespread in the Polish People's Republic. The functional substitute for trust was corruption in various forms and versions. It was encouraged by the shortage economy, where soap from the German Democratic Republic was a luxury. The public still remembers waiting lists for washing machines or cars, methods of moving up the lists, and mechanisms of flat acquisition, as well as the pivotal role of housing association presidents in the process. In other words, Poland's history is one of lack of social order, normative cohesion, and institutional and organisational transparency, which has led to a culture of distrust. It is reflected in vivid conspiracy theories like the one re-

369 Sztompka 2007, p. 279.

370 Sztompka 2007, p. 280.

garding the Smolensk air disaster on 10 April 2010³⁷¹ and causes a low level of social trust.

Sztompka proposed that the five macroeconomic factors driving the culture of trust, limited trust, and distrust provide conditions for betting on others' actions. Still, it is people who make the final decision. The decisions are affected by personality, level of agency, optimism, openness to change, high professional aspirations, and human capital resources linked to socioeconomic status. He added that the culture of trust is contingent on the level of the resources typical of society members.³⁷² Edmund Mokrzycki, a renowned Polish sociologist, wrote about the Polish rural population in the 1990s: *What makes the peasant a peasant is beyond him. It is a characteristic of the society he lives in. It is an abyssal developmental rift that separates the basic rural mass from the rest of society. The former lives in a civilisational niche stretching deep into the past, while the latter follows the developing world. The line between the rural and the urban is the most fundamental societal division. The civilisational niche delivers the peasant from forced modernisation, condemning him to the status of a denizen of a lesser world. Regrettably, a vast majority of Polish peasantry follow this direction. The cause has been the same throughout history: an unquestioningly giving hand of the state, which hands out dependence, helplessness, and moral decay instead of the intended assistance.*³⁷³ In other words, low income, low level of education, and ensuing problems have been reinforcing distrustful attitudes towards strangers and reducing the trust radius to family and possibly immediate neighbours, although land conflicts were not uncommon in the Polish countryside. Rural transformations, improved levels of education, and higher socioeconomic status are significant but insufficient to replace a culture of distrust with a culture of trust.

371 Among the 96 casualties were the President of the Republic of Poland with his wife, Deputy Marshalls of the Sejm and Senate, parliamentarians, commanders of all military branches of Poland, Presidents' Chancellery staff, heads of state institutions, clergy, representatives of ministries, veteran organisations, and social organisations. They were on their way to ceremonies marking the 70th anniversary of the Katyn massacre, a genocide of 22 thousands of Polish citizens, including about 10 thousand officers of the Polish Armed Forces carried out by the Soviet Union's NKVD (the Soviet secret police) in spring 1940. Among the 96 casualties were the President of the Republic of Poland with his wife, Deputy Marshalls of the Sejm and Senate, parliamentarians, commanders of all military branches of Poland, Presidents' Chancellery staff, heads of state institutions, clergy, representatives of ministries, veteran organisations, and social organisations. They were on their way to ceremonies marking the 70th anniversary of the Katyn massacre, a genocide of 22 thousands of Polish citizens, including about 10 thousand officers of the Polish Armed Forces carried out by the Soviet Union's NKVD (the Soviet secret police) in spring 1940.

372 Sztompka 2007.

373 Mokrzycki 1997, p. 13.

According to the survey, municipal officials and the Roman Catholic Church still enjoy a significant, if declining, level of trust among rural residents (over 40%). Every third respondent trusts the EU, municipal authorities, and courts. Other churches inspire merely minuscule trust in the Polish countryside (Tab. 21).

Table 21. Generalised trust in other trust recipients [%]

| Trust in | Trust dimensions | Total | Most people can be trusted | You can't be too careful in dealing with people | Cramer's V |
|------------------------------------|------------------|-------|----------------------------|---|------------|
| Immediate family | I | 95.3 | 97.4 | 94.6 | 0.099* |
| Extended family | I | 70.0 | 80.5 | 66.1 | 0.166* |
| Neighbours | I | 63.2 | 77.8 | 56 | 0.233* |
| Colleagues | I | 59.3 | 74.4 | 52.5 | 0.216* |
| Municipal administration officials | II | 42.5 | 51.9 | 38.5 | 0.146* |
| Roman Catholic Church | III | 42.8 | 49.2 | 40.6 | 0.119* |
| EU | II | 31.9 | 41.8 | 27.8 | 0.149* |
| Local municipal authorities | II/III | 31.5 | 41.0 | 27.3 | 0.147* |
| Courts of law | II | 29.7 | 35.4 | 27.3 | 0.130* |
| Other churches | III | 15.0 | 35 | 10.8 | 0.203* |

* statistically significant differences for $p < 0.01$. Note: values in the 'Total' column are sums of percentages for 'definitely trust' and 'probably trust'.

The rural attitude towards the EU has changed over time. Before the integration in 2004, the rural population, especially farmers, was sceptical. Their concerns were at the heart of the Eurosceptics' arguments. They maintained that the integration would cause economic problems (the main concerns were the import of goods from the EU and a significant decline in exports, especially of commodities that do not promote quality-based competition). Other arguments included fears of limiting the state's independence and identity problems (allegedly brought by the uniformisation of culture, decline of local folk culture, and introduction of elements of behaviour and lifestyles from alien cultures). The farmers' aversion disappeared five years after the accession. In 2019, the support for EU membership was high in the Polish countryside and among farmers.³⁷⁴ Most of the Polish society (78%) believed that membership had more benefits

374 Fedyszak-Radziejowska 2020, pp. 71–72.

than costs. This was true for populations in the biggest cities (87%) and over three-fourths of rural areas (77%).³⁷⁵

Another interesting, although in fact expected, result is that those who declare generalised trust in others exhibit significantly greater trust in all recipients as opposed to people who are cautious in their dealings with others. This pattern is true for each and every case regardless of the general level of trust in the recipient. Therefore, generalised trust is positively correlated with trust in family, acquaintances, officials, churches, or the EU.

As mentioned above, generalised trust emerges from shared values. Assessment of the importance or weight of over a dozen aspects/values one can potentially follow in life³⁷⁶ make up four distinctive ‘value patterns’.³⁷⁷

The first dimension covers such values as health, security, freedom, and peaceful life. They can be interpreted as the need for ‘life harmony’ and attention towards ‘the inside’ necessary for reaching mental well-being.

The second dimension holds values that stand for ‘success and tangible achievements’, such as work, education, money, and an adventurous and eventful life. They are primarily concerned with the life goal of reaching a social status.

The third, familial, dimension combines such values as having children and marriage. It is complemented by faith/religion.

The fourth dimension can be considered ‘social’. It includes such values as integrity (within a social relationship), friends, and received respect (Tab. 22).

Table 22. Generalised trust and cherished values [%]

| Value | Value patterns | Total | Most people can be trusted | You can't be too careful in dealing with people | Cramer's V |
|-----------------|----------------|-------|----------------------------|---|------------|
| Integrity | IV | 98.8 | 99.1 | 98.7 | NS |
| Health | I | 98.7 | 98.7 | 98.6 | NS |
| Security | I | 98.6 | 98 | 98.8 | NS |
| Freedom | I | 97.8 | 98.1 | 97.7 | NS |
| Peaceful life | I | 96 | 93.9 | 97 | 0.148** |
| Friends | IV | 93.7 | 95.5 | 93 | 0.096** |
| Work | II | 91.6 | 89.2 | 92.4 | NS |
| Having children | III | 91.3 | 91.4 | 91.3 | NS |

375 Roguska 2019, p. 15.

376 They were assessed with a five-point scale, where opposing categories were described as 1 – the least important and 5 – very important.

377 The ‘value patterns’ were identified based on factor loading from a principal component analysis with promax rotation and Kaiser normalisation. The dimensions explained 51.4% of the variance of the analysed variables in aggregate: 23.5%, 11.7%, 8.5%, and 7.7%, respectively. KMO=0.778, Bartlett test significance<0.001.

(Continued)

| Value | Value patterns | Total | Most people can be trusted | You can't be too careful in dealing with people | Cramer's V |
|-------------------------------|----------------|-------|----------------------------|---|------------|
| Respect from others | IV | 89.8 | 87.8 | 90.7 | NS |
| Marriage | III | 85.7 | 86.1 | 85.5 | NS |
| Education | II | 76.5 | 74.7 | 77.2 | NS |
| Money | II | 74.5 | 69.5 | 76.6 | 0.100** |
| Faith/religion | III | 66.8 | 68.5 | 66.2 | 0.090* |
| Adventurous and eventful life | II | 52.6 | 53.6 | 52.2 | NS |

* statistically significant differences for $p < 0.05$, ** for $p < 0.01$. Note: values in the 'Total' column are sums of percentages for the last two affirmative values on the scale.

Most of the values presented to the rural respondents are considered important. Integrity, health, security, freedom and peaceful life received the highest proportions of positive responses (95% of answers were affirmative). Slightly lower but still considerable acceptance (over 85%) was found for values related to friends, work, having children, respect from others, and marriage. The lowest acceptance was expressed for education, money, faith/religion, and an adventurous life. Only some values important in life differentiate people exhibiting generalised trust from those who deal with others with caution. Trusting people value friends and faith/religion significantly more, which is typical of social capital. Peaceful life and money are significantly more important to people with a lower trust potential.

The surprisingly relatively low weight of education among the rural population could be explained by the fact that most rural residents (54.6%) in 2004 had primary or incomplete primary education, 28% had vocational education, 14% had secondary, and merely 3% had higher and post-secondary education. In 2019, most of the rural population (52%) had secondary, post-secondary, or incomplete higher education. Twenty per cent had a university degree, and 26% graduated from a vocational school or did not finish high school. In short, the decline in the perceived importance of education could be due to its higher general level in the countryside. In addition, although valued during the sociopolitical transformation in the 1990s and over a few years after Poland joined the EU, education does not guarantee higher income, which also modulates attitudes towards it as a social value.³⁷⁸

Rural communities are now wealthier than before the EU accession, which affects their attitudes towards money. In 1997, 42.7% of the urban population and

378 Fedyszak-Radziejowska 2020, p. 57.

62.5% of the rural population existed in the social exclusion zone (below the subsistence minimum), while absolute poverty was the lot of 3.3% and 8.7%, respectively. Before 2004, the estimated GDP for rural areas was about 31% below that of cities in Poland. In 1997, the Human Development Index (HDI) of urban (0.828) and rural (0.794) municipalities was equivalent to that of countries with 'high' and 'medium' HDI, respectively.³⁷⁹ Today, Poles are more optimistic when evaluating their financial standing regardless of where they live. The share of Poles, also from the countryside, who declare a good or very good financial situation grew in 2019. Additionally, more of them believe their social position is higher than that of their parents. It is the opinion of 55% of the general population, 57% of city residents, 53% of farmers, and 54% of the rural population.³⁸⁰

The attitude of rural communities towards faith and religion is surprising. These values rank relatively low in the rural population's value set, even though 92.2% are declared believers. It is perhaps because faith does not entail active participation in religious activities. This is true for a significant part of the sample. Every fourth respondent (28.3%) declared being a lapsed or only occasionally practising believer (for example, on Christmas) (13.8% and 14.5%, respectively). As many as 31.6% practise once a month or skip some practices (11.5% and 20.1%, respectively). One-third (28.8%) consider themselves very religious. A few per cent could not clearly define their religious attitudes and refused to answer (2.4%). The countryside is undergoing secularisation similarly to the city, if slightly slower. Faith is becoming more selective, individualised, and axiologically relative. The clergy and religious teachers no longer inspire, especially the young generation. The Church is increasingly perceived as a quasi-political institution.³⁸¹ It is perhaps because of its history-rooted political engagement. During the Partitions, the Church preserved Polish culture, nurtured the 'spirit of the nation', and politically opposed the invaders by resisting Russification and Germanisation. During Communism, it offered an alternative to official propaganda as a stronghold of traditional norms and values. It brought together and supported the opposition. The election of Pope John Paul II, the 'Polish Pope', is considered a breakthrough in the struggle for independence and the birth of the modern Polish state. In this sense, the Catholic Church has never been politically neutral in Poland, be it in macropolitics or local politics, as a counterweight to landowners. Today, the Church is criticised for its political involvement because it is no longer a bastion of Polish culture and a defender against a hostile invader.³⁸² Furthermore, the change in attitude towards the

379 Fedyszak-Radziejowska 2020, pp. 57–58.

380 Fedyszak-Radziejowska 2020, p. 64.

381 Rogowski 2018, pp. 251–253.

382 Marody 2019, pp. 21–26.

Church among Poles, including the rural population, is linked to changes in norms and values concerning the family and social roles of its members, particularly women. The Catholic Church disapproves of divorce, abortion, euthanasia, and homosexuality, which does not align with the axionormative system of the young generation in particular.³⁸³

3.2 Informal networks and social support

An actor's social network is composed of persons with whom they have direct relationships (through in-person contact) and those linked vicariously through other people. The social network is shaped by its range, density, and multiplexity. The range is determined by the (sociodemographic) diversity of network actors with whom the actor has relationships. The range defined this way is small if the individual has relationships only with their family and immediate neighbours. The density of the social network hinges on the number of reciprocal and strong connections between actors. The more direct and regular contacts between actors, the denser the network. The degree of typological diversity of the relationships between the actor and other network members determines its multiplexity. If a person linked to the actor has multiple social roles in relation to the actor (such as a neighbour and a GP or a member of the same sports club), the relationship is complex. If they are only neighbours, the relationship is simple.³⁸⁴

Now, the actor's chances of accessing diversified resources that are not at their direct disposal depend on the specificity of the social networks in which they participate. Actors in social networks have resources that other actors can access thanks to ties between them. The larger, more complex, and denser the actor's social network, the better the chance of accessing a larger resource pool to mobilise.

As previously mentioned, resources can be safeguarded through emotional and expressive actions. These actions are taken within informal social networks made up of people connected by mutual, strong social ties based on kinship, status similarity, or other sociodemographic factors. It is the bonding form of social capital as opposed to the bridging form typical of social networks among people with different socioeconomic characteristics.³⁸⁵

The most obvious places for strong social ties are family, friends, and acquaintances. Relationships with close friends and family provide social support, which can be defined as a 'multidimensional construct that includes physical and

383 Marody 2019, p. 25.

384 Burt 1982, pp. 31–32.

385 Putnam 2000, p. 21.

instrumental assistance, attitude transmission, resource and information sharing, and emotional and psychological support.³⁸⁶ Therefore, social support boils down to the ‘availability of people whom the individual trusts, on whom he can rely, and who make him feel cared for and valued as a person.’³⁸⁷ Support can come in the form of actual actions and interventions (received support) or a belief that support will be granted if needed (perceived support).³⁸⁸

Thanks to the sense of ties with friends and family (sense of bonding) and, more importantly, rooting them in mutual obligations with trusted partners (sense of binding), actors in a relationship understand and share the responsibility for the well-being of the other person. It is then that actions become expressive, and people can share their feelings, address frustrations, understand the problems of others, affirm one’s worth, and reinforce dignity.³⁸⁹

Many authors highlight the causal pattern of social support leading to well-being.³⁹⁰ Social support helps reduce physiological responses to stressors, encourages people to constructively analyse difficult events, promotes prevention (such as exercise), and discourages unhealthy actions (such as smoking).³⁹¹

Social support can take various forms. Emotional support empowers one to build self-worth based on information from friends and family that one is not only accepted but valued despite one’s shortcomings. Informational support is useful for understanding problems and finding solutions. Companionship support helps realise the need for affiliation, while the presence of others during relaxation or recreation provides a distraction from everyday concerns and problems. Instrumental support means tangible aid in the form of money, goods, or services. Esteem support is the feedback that negative emotions brought by everyday challenges are natural. It moderates the perception of one’s weaknesses, helps accept feelings and build a positive frame of reference.³⁹²

Although the expected form of support depends on a complex context of crisscrossing needs, research shows that emotional support is the most effective kind for dealing with stress factors (stressors).³⁹³ It is true even in circumstances where other forms of support seem to be more appropriate (such as financial stress, physical limitations, or life-threatening diseases). Ongoing support from friends and family builds a social (interpersonal) dimension, which, together with environmental factors (community resources, safe home, financial security)

386 Dunst, Trivette, Cross 1986, p. 403.

387 McDowell 2006, p. 152.

388 Wills / Shinar 2000, p. 87.

389 Lin 1986, pp. 19–20.

390 Cohen / Syme 1985; House 1981; Leavy 1983; Turner 1983.

391 Dunn 2015, p. 130.

392 Cohen / Wills 1985, p. 313; Wills / Shinar 2000, p. 89.

393 Wills / Fegan 2001, p. 227.

and personal factors (sound self-esteem, self-worth, problem-solving skills), contribute to the restoration of psychosocial balance in the face of a threat.³⁹⁴ Considering this, the nature of the relationships between a person and their friends and family affects their quality of life and mental well-being (psychological/subjective well-being), which is ‘a psychological construct concerned not with what people have or what happens to them but with how they think about and feel about what they have and what happens to them.’³⁹⁵ The level of psychological well-being is contingent on a complexity of factors, including self-acceptance (positive opinion of oneself), positive relationships with others (based on intimacy and love), autonomy (living in accordance with one’s beliefs), environment control (creating and protecting friendly surroundings), life goals (finding the meaning of life and choosing goals), and personal development (putting one’s potential and talent to work).³⁹⁶ In this context, social relationships based on strong social ties gauge the acceptance of an individual’s choices and provide support to follow through on them.

As a relational resource, social capital requires the presence of others. This cliché accurately emphasises the crux of social capital. Only access to others, whether direct or vicarious, has the potential to enable the flow of resources between people, facilitate cooperation, and create a ‘positive-sum game’.

Any analysis of rural social activity has to consider its informal nature. Characteristics of informal social networks include the number of friends, frequency of social gatherings, and sense of loneliness. The European Social Survey measured the problem using questions like ‘How often do you meet socially with friends, relatives, or work colleagues?’ and ‘Do you have anyone with whom you can discuss intimate or personal matters?’

Answers to the first question show that there are relatively few people in Poland who do not meet socially with others. In the 2002–2023 surveys, the group was never larger than 5%. Still, virtually each consecutive survey round (with a few exceptions) demonstrated that rural residents did not participate in social life relatively more often compared to people living in big cities (except for 2002) or towns (except for 2010 and 2012). The differences may not be big, but the trend is meaningful (Fig. 4).

Similar dependencies concerning the place of living can be found in answers to the other question about someone with whom the respondents can speak frankly. In none of the ESS rounds conducted in Poland, the proportion of respondents who admitted to having no one to turn to for emotional support

394 Craig 2012, p. 478.

395 Maddux 2018, pp. 4–5.

396 Ryff 1989.

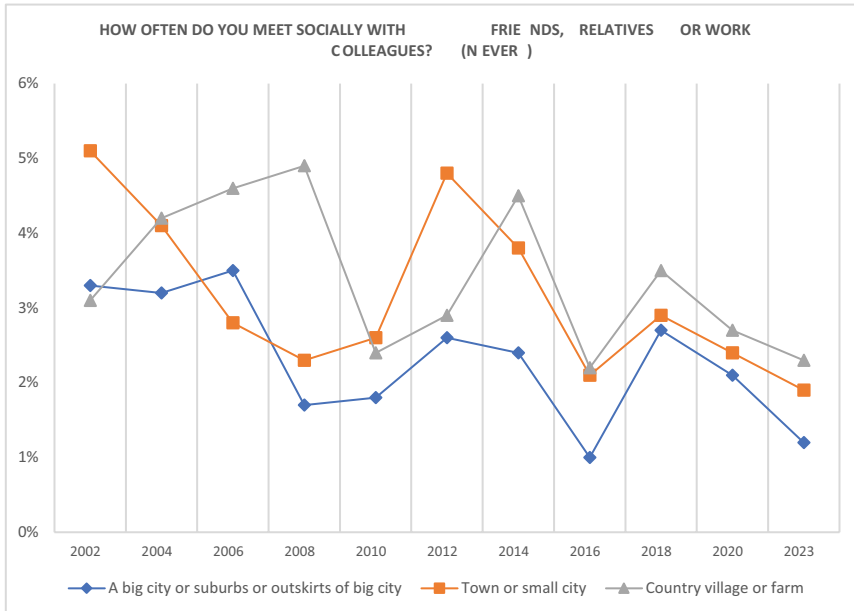


Figure 4. People not participating in social life depending on place of living. Source: ESS 2002–2023.

exceeded 15%. Still, the rural situation is again worse than in cities and towns (except for 2012) (Fig. 5).

Does the absence of confidantes mean loneliness? Perhaps. Beyond any doubt, it is consequential for psychological well-being and the potential of building social capital. Loneliness emerges from insufficient social relationships. It is subjective and different from social isolation, which is an objective phenomenon. People can be alone and not feel lonely or, indeed, suffer from loneliness in a crowd. Notably, loneliness is an unpleasant and disconcerting experience.³⁹⁷ The link between loneliness and nature or interpersonal relationships is obvious and present in all theories, but its conceptualisation varies. Some put emphasis on the need for intimacy. Others emphasise the role of the cognitive process in the perception and evaluation of social relationships. The individual's experience and the experiences of others are relevant as a potential frame of reference for oneself. Others still link loneliness with insufficient social reinforcement or support, which is considered a primary deficit people can sustain.³⁹⁸

A 2024 survey among the Polish rural population reveals that relatively few suffer from loneliness. When asked 'How many people can you call a friend?' only

397 Peplau / Perlman 1982, p. 3.

398 Ibidem, p. 5.

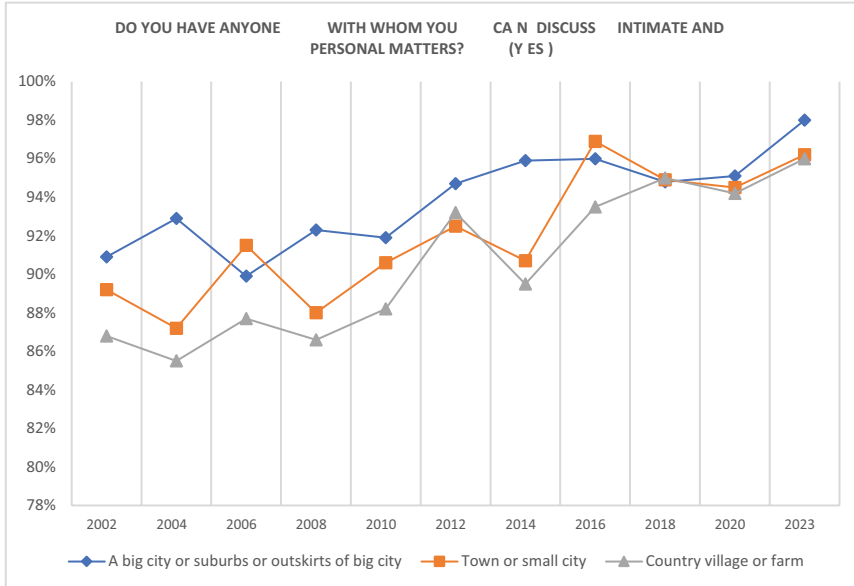


Figure 5. People with strong social ties with others by place of living. Source: ESS 2002–2023.

3.1% of the respondents answered ‘none’. The estimated numbers of friends the other respondents provided indicated the sizes and densities of their informal social networks, with density defined as the number of mutual ties that friendship undoubtedly offers. The most prevalent number of friends was 1–3 (35.1%), followed by 4–6 (32.2%). The least numerous size of the friend circle was 7 and over (28.8%). The absence of friends does not necessarily mean loneliness. Every third person without friends (34.1%) and every third person unable to provide a conclusive answer (33.3%) admitted to being lonely (Tab. 23).

Table 23. Number of friends vs loneliness and generalised trust [%]

| Friends | | Loneliness | | Generalised trust | |
|--------------------|------|------------|------|----------------------------|---|
| | | yes | no | Most people can be trusted | You can't be too careful in dealing with people |
| Absence of friends | 3.1 | 34.1 | 65.9 | 12.2 | 87.8 |
| 1–3 people | 35.1 | NA | | 24.7 | 75.3 |
| 4–6 people | 32.2 | NA | | 28.2 | 71.8 |
| 7 and more people | 28.8 | NA | | 38.6 | 61.4 |
| Hard to say | 0.9 | 33.3 | 66.7 | 21.4 | 78.6 |

The size of the friend network and generalised trust are correlated, as anticipated. The larger the social network, the greater trust in others (Cramer's $V=0.143$, for $p<0.01$). People with no friends exhibit the largest trust deficit.

Inhabitants of rural areas reported positive relationships with other local residents. It is evident in their responses to two questions about 1) received respect and 2) received trust.³⁹⁹ The first question gathered a total of 3.4% of negative answers (0–2). Similarly, the percentage of negative answers to the other question was 3.1%. Most of the rural residents felt respected and trusted. It is the opinion of three out of four respondents (76.5% for a rather large degree and 77.1% for a large degree). The other participants either remained neutral (13.1% and 12.8%, respectively) or were unable to address the questions ('hard to say') (7% each). Obviously and yet meaningfully, there is a strong positive correlation (Kendall's $\text{Tau-b}=0.730$, for $p<0.01$) between answers to the questions about respect and trust received (controlling for 'hard to say'). Tokens of trust entail tokens of respect.

Most rural residents have no reason to complain about a paucity of potential (diversified) instrumental or emotional support from others.⁴⁰⁰

All these types of support were available to 93.1% of the rural population. Conversely, only 0.7% of the respondents indicated they would not receive any support in these circumstances. The remaining 6.2% would expect support with at least one of the problematic situations. In general, the share of people expecting support is similar in each case and always above 90% (Tab. 24).

Table 24. Support type [%]

| | Is there someone who would: | | | |
|-------------|-----------------------------|--------------|----------------|---------------------------|
| | provide financial support | help at home | lend equipment | provide emotional support |
| There is | 92.7 | 95.0 | 97.4 | 95.7 |
| There isn't | 4.3 | 4.0 | 1.3 | 2.8 |
| Hard to say | 3.1 | 1.0 | 1.3 | 1.6 |

399 Both questions involved a five-point scale: 0 – 'not at all', 1 – 'to a small degree', 2 – 'to a rather small degree', 3 – 'neither large nor small degree', 4 – 'to a rather large degree', and 5 – 'to a large degree'.

400 The respondents were asked whether there were people in their family, among friends, or acquaintances who would: a) provide them with financial support if they found it hard to make ends meet for any reason, b) help them with groceries, household chores, babysitting, minor home repairs, etc., c) lend them tools, household appliances, vehicles, etc., and d) provide them with emotional support by listening, showing they cared, offering advice, raising their spirits, helping calm down, etc.

The density of social networks can also be reflected in everyday reciprocal interactions in the form of regular conversations. The frequency of conversations between rural residents and people from various social circles varies: immediate family, extended family, friends, neighbours, other inhabitants of rural areas, colleagues, councillors, village heads, and local priests receive different levels of attention.⁴⁰¹ Some of these circles have an inherent natural, emotional, or occasional urge for conversation (with household members, friends, or colleagues, for example). In others, conversations are initiated by different needs that can be rooted in specific interests (such as with councillors or priests). Therefore, it is only natural that rural residents speak to some people more often than others. Most often, the conversations take place between immediate family members. If 'every day' and 'several times a week' are considered often, then 93.1% talk often to immediate family. Work colleagues are second in the line (86.1%), followed by neighbours (57.8%), friends (49.6%), other rural residents (29.3%), and extended family (20.6%). In the case of such more remote circles as village heads, councillors, and priests, the absence of conversations seems a better indicator than their everyday occurrence. The largest group of respondents did not talk to councillors (28.4%), village heads (15.4%), and priests (13.6%) at all⁴⁰² (Tab. 25).

Table 25. Frequency of in-person meetings with representatives of various social circles [%]

| Persons | Every day | Several times a week | Once a week | Several times a month | Less frequently | Never | Total |
|------------------|-----------|----------------------|-------------|-----------------------|-----------------|-------|-------|
| Immediate family | 82 | 11.1 | 3 | 2.1 | 1.5 | 0.3 | 100 |
| Colleagues | 72.4 | 13.7 | 4.5 | 3.2 | 5.2 | 0.9 | 100 |
| Neighbours | 30.2 | 27.6 | 21 | 10.6 | 9.2 | 1.4 | 100 |
| Friends | 21.2 | 28.4 | 31.7 | 13.8 | 4.9 | NA | 100 |
| Rural residents | 7.9 | 21.4 | 23.5 | 20.3 | 24.5 | 2.4 | 100 |

401 Six answer options were available: 'every day', 'several times a week', 'once a week', 'several times a month', 'less frequently', and 'never'.

402 Interestingly, the principal component analysis identified three typical 'social circles' based on the frequency of meetings with their representatives. The first circle is the 'family' circle (immediate and extended family and friends). The second circle is 'neighbours' (actual neighbours, other rural residents, and colleagues as 'workplace neighbours'). The third is the 'institution' circle (village head, councillors, priests). The 'social circles' were identified based on factor loading from a principal component analysis with promax rotation and Kaiser normalisation. The dimensions explained 51.6% of the variance of the analysed variables in aggregate: 24.7%, 13.6%, and 13.3%, respectively. KMO=0.649, Bartlett test significance<0.001.

(Continued)

| Persons | Every day | Several times a week | Once a week | Several times a month | Less frequently | Never | Total |
|-----------------|-----------|----------------------|-------------|-----------------------|-----------------|-------|-------|
| Extended family | 3.6 | 17 | 28.1 | 22.8 | 27.3 | 1.2 | 100 |
| Village head | 3.3 | 2.8 | 9.4 | 13.7 | 55.5 | 15.4 | 100 |
| Councillors | 2.5 | 2.3 | 4.4 | 10.6 | 51.8 | 28.4 | 100 |
| Priests | 1 | 2.7 | 11 | 9 | 62.7 | 13.6 | 100 |

Relatively frequent conversations within rural communities may suggest that most of their members maintain good neighbour relationships. They include a certain degree of kindness, which is important for developing capital resources in informal social networks.⁴⁰³ Good neighbour relationships in the Polish countryside are embodied in the fact that the vast majority of rural communities (94.8%) greet their neighbours and talk to them, and a significant majority (83.1%) do small favours such as lending things or house-sitting. Nearly half of them (46.9%) have very good relationships with neighbours because they visit each other on special occasions. All three activities were indicated by 43.4% of the respondents. Simultaneously, 97.7% selected at least one activity that helps maintain good neighbour relationships.

Only a relatively small group admitted to antagonistic relationships. Avoidance is practised by 7.3%, while 2.2% are in conflict with their neighbours. Both activities were declared by 1.4% of the respondents. Eight per cent of the rural population engages in at least one. Social isolation is virtually non-existent in the Polish countryside. Only 0.7% of the respondents did not select any positive or negative activity. Some, although not many (0.7%), visit some neighbours on special occasions, render small favours, and talk to them while avoiding others or fighting with them (Tab. 26).

403 The topic was pursued further. The respondents were asked about certain neighbourhood situations that could take place in any small community. On the one hand, the questions concerned visiting neighbours on special occasions, small favours, greetings, and talking. On the other hand, the respondents could indicate whether they avoided their neighbours or were conflicted with them.

Table 26. Neighbour relationships [%]

| Situation | Individual situa- tions | Simulta- neously | | Any situa- tion |
|--|----------------------------|---------------------|-----|--------------------|
| | | | | |
| we visit each other on special occasions | 46.9 | 43.4 | 0.7 | 97.7 |
| we do small favours for each other | 83.1 | | | |
| we say 'good morning' and talk a little | 94.8 | | | |
| we avoid each other and do not talk at all | 7.3 | 1.4 | | 8.0 |
| we are constantly in conflict | 2.2 | | | |
| none of them | 0.7 | NA | NA | NA |

Note: the percentages do not add up to 100 because the questions are multiple-answer questions.

As the countryside transformation progressed, strong neighbour relationships changed, becoming more fragmented and weaker. Neighbours no longer need to exchange services, especially in the consumer society. This is one reason why local cooperation, historically founded on neighbourly assistance and spontaneous activity, is now increasingly organised. Still, although weaker and changed, neighbourly assistance remains part of the rural axionormative system. Its importance is manifest in emergency situations such as natural disasters (fire or flood, for example) and in activities that benefit the entire community, such as building a gazebo or playground or preparing for large projects (such as clearing land for a pitch). Still, such endeavours are rarely born of solid neighbour ties typical of a traditional village considered all but autarkic (especially before the Second World War). Neighbourly assistance was integral to rural communities at the time. It was part of everyday life (seasonal farming work, construction works, or occasional gifts, for example, for newlyweds) and emergency situations when the entire village rushed to help in the case of a fire or another fatal incident. The same principle was applied to projects that brought value to the entire village, such as building a school.⁴⁰⁴

When investigating changes in rural neighbour ties today, it is imperative to recognise that even the traditional village was not free of antagonistic attitudes, not only between peasants and landlords or 'us' and 'them' but also among neighbours. Life in the shortage economy, with death from starvation, malnutrition, and various diseases being commonplace, ingrained distrust in rural communities. Also, neighbour antagonism was a recurring problem. Ethnographers often gave examples of neighbour conflicts about seemingly trivial issues, such as ploughing over a field boundary, damaged orchard, garden, or field, or farm animals. Some of them persisted over extended periods, often spanning

404 Zawistowicz-Adamska 1987.

generations.⁴⁰⁵ Rural neighbour relationships are still different than in cities. In the latter case, the atrophy of neighbour relationships is faster, a phenomenon not specific to post-socialist societies.

In his analysis of the vanishing of neighbour relationships in the USA and, more broadly, the decline in civic engagement and social capital in American society, Robert Putnam identified as the main causes the time and money pressure, suburbanisation linked to long commutes, and privatisation of spare time away from shared initiatives (bolstered by mass media). The generational change is of import as well. The 'long civic generation' is being slowly replaced by its less public-involved children and grandchildren.⁴⁰⁶ Polish researchers propose to look for causes of the atrophy of neighbour ties in the individualisation of life, autoseparation, and pursuit of personal and familial security, where anonymity and social distance are intended as defences against threats.⁴⁰⁷

3.3 Social engagement and cooperation

In addition to bonding social capital shaped through relationships with friends and family, an individual may access bridging capital generated through weaker social ties. It emerges from direct connections with representatives of other social networks (and social categories) or through access to intermediaries who 'control' structural holes⁴⁰⁸ to facilitate the flow of resources between networks. Bridging social capital is often investigated in the context of associations. By associating with others, Amy Gutmann emphasised,⁴⁰⁹ people engage in friendly relationships, cooperate, debate, deliberate, negotiate, compete, and grow more creative, expressing themselves and sacrificing for others. All these activities are possible only in relationships with others.

There are three types of associations depending on whether the relationships between individuals are thick or thin. Families and friend circles are primary associations. The relationships in secondary associations are less direct, although they still involve relatively strong social ties. These associations include sports clubs, civic committees, and self-help groups. Tertiary associations are more anonymous compared to the previous types, and their members share relatively fewer characteristics. The keystone is the common goal that individuals pursue

405 Burszta 1976, p. 450.

406 Putnam 2008.

407 Kluzowicz 2020.

408 Burt 1995, p. 18.

409 Gutmann 1998, p. 4.

through joint efforts. This type of association is represented by lobbying groups, federations, umbrella organisations, etc.⁴¹⁰

The importance of primary associations for social capital has been discussed above. The roles of the two other forms of association can be investigated from the macro and micro perspectives. The former uses such terms as intermediary organisations or interest groups to describe the function and role of organisations or associations. By participating in such collectives, individuals try to be active players in the political process and affect policies through institutionalised decision-making procedures. Hence, interest groups seek to pursue the interests of their members or attain broader goals. The macro perspective, on the other hand, focuses on the role of interest groups in (dis)integrating separate parts or loci of social systems. A system is being integrated when organisations successfully mediate between citizens and the state or between groups. Conversely, the micro perspective employs such terms as voluntary associations or civic associations, emphasising the freedom on which the groups are founded. In this case, the focal point is the citizen mobilisation and participation in associations. It also analyses the impact of the associations' efforts on the engaged citizens. Voluntary and spontaneous associations promote the growth of specific skills and the development of social networks that may be useful for pursuing predefined goals (including self-realisation and self-development). Therefore, this perspective emphasises the link between voluntary organisations and dis(integration) of individuals within a social system. The success of social integration is contingent on citizen mobilisation to collective activities.⁴¹¹

Associational or associative activity can affect an individual's development in the form of agency, improved effectiveness, access to political information (such as public speaking, negotiations, or compromising), civic virtues (including tolerance, mutual respect, trust, reciprocity, law observance, and respect for rights of others), and criticism. This type of activity, perceived from the individual's perspective, encourages civic attributes that determine the nature of a specific society's political culture and promotes skills that can be used in political activities.⁴¹² Engagement in associations provides a basis for enhancing one's knowledge, competencies, and experience through human interactions and the pursuit of various organisational functions. It helps generate social capital and develop human capital at the same time.

As shown by Sidney Verba, Kay L. Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady,⁴¹³ engagement in voluntary associations affects the individual in three planes. First, it

410 Warren 2001, p. 39.

411 van Deth 1997, p. 2.

412 Almond / Verba 1963/1989; Verba / Nie 1972.

413 Verba / Schlozman / Brady 1995, p. 40.

empowers them to develop and put to use organisational and communication skills like preparing and chairing meetings, delivering speeches, or writing letters. Second, an association streamlines networking and social network expansion, facilitating political activity. Third, association efforts sensitise individuals to social and political problems, providing a forum for exchanging and debating views.

In the public dimension, an association may mould public opinion through social communication and deliberation, which helps introduce critical issues into the political debate while highlighting differences (exclusive membership) and similarities (inclusive membership) in society.⁴¹⁴ Voluntary associations create a 'free space' where traditional values and identities are continuously reinterpreted. There, regular people are empowered to learn self-respect, deepen and strengthen group identity, acquire social competencies, and discover the value of cooperation and civic virtues.⁴¹⁵ In this context, engagement in associations is a form of social interaction and integration but also a way to open the mind more by learning about problems, failures, struggles, successes, or the happiness of others. The motivation for such activity comes from understanding one's own problem and the problems of others.⁴¹⁶

Engagement in associations affects institutions where collective decisions are made, and joint activities are organised. In this context, associations can represent the interests of their members before political entities and offer resistance through voting, dissemination of information, demonstrations, or civil disobedience. They become alternative entities in the political process by following the principles of subsidiarity, coordination, and cooperation. This does not exclude another potential impact: the legitimisation of the democratic order and effects of the state policy, even when they are not completely aligned with the principles and policies for which the association stands.⁴¹⁷

Institutionalised participation can take various forms. The term 'participation' alone is defined and used differently depending on the context, giving rise to such concepts as civic, civil, vertical, horizontal, political, public, or social participation. Participation can be described using three broad categories.⁴¹⁸

Public participation means individuals engaging in activities of the structures and institutions of a democratic state. This form of participation is also referred to as political, civic, vertical participation or participatory governance. Examples of public participation include voting in local and national elections, being a councillor, or participating in governmental consultations.

414 Warren 2001, pp. 77–82.

415 Evans / Boyte 1986, p. 17.

416 Roßteutscher 2008, p. 211.

417 Warren 2001, pp. 82–93.

418 Brodie et al. 2009, pp. 4–5.

Social participation is the second form of engagement. It covers collective activities that may become part of the everyday activity of individuals. Examples of social participation include membership in social groups, associations, or trade unions, support for hospices, and leading a religious group. This form of engagement is also referred to as associational life, collective activities, or horizontal and community participation.

Individual participation is the third manifestation of the phenomenon. It is often referred to as everyday politics because it concerns the choices and actions individuals take every day. It also covers statements or declarations regarding the kind of society in which the individual aspires to participate. Consumer choices, boycotts of specific goods and services, use of renewable energy, charity donations, or petition signing are all elements of individual participation. Note that all three forms of participation can overlap and be interrelated. Awareness of one's needs can lead to the urge to form social 'alliances' with advocates of similar approaches, which may initiate collective actions supported by relevant political choices or public activity.

The diverse forms of participation align with the framework of the third sector, which facilitates diversion from functional patterns of the state and households both. The third sector provides countervailing definitions of reality and morality so that they can be perceived in innovative ways, while old traditions, beliefs, faith, history, or cultural artefacts can still be protected. This facilitates the implementation of the educational and integrative functions of the expressive and socialising aspects.⁴¹⁹

The literature emphasises that these organisations deliver goods and public services more effectively than government agencies and are trusted more than for-profit organisations. Second, they are indispensable in building and rebuilding civil society and reinforcing links between social capital and economic growth. People cooperating in associational networks are more perceptive of social problems, more productive economically, and more engaged politically. Third, they are critical for social responsibility as voices and advocates of public opinion. Fourth, they introduce innovation to social problem solving, primarily thanks to their small scale and close relationships with the groups they work with.⁴²⁰

Associational or associative activity in Poland is relatively low regardless of its type.⁴²¹ The European Social Survey corroborates this statement. Its results show

419 Smith 2001, pp. 79–87.

420 Anheier 2013.

421 Masłyk / Piróg 2020.

that civic activity in Poland from 2002 to 2018 was stable. No meaningful change took place until the penultimate round of ESS in Poland in 2021–2022.⁴²²

Differences based on place of living emerge for formalised activities as they did for generalised trust, social activities, or having a trusted person. The rural population achieved lower results than town inhabitants and much lower than the city population. The differences over time are shown in Fig. 6.

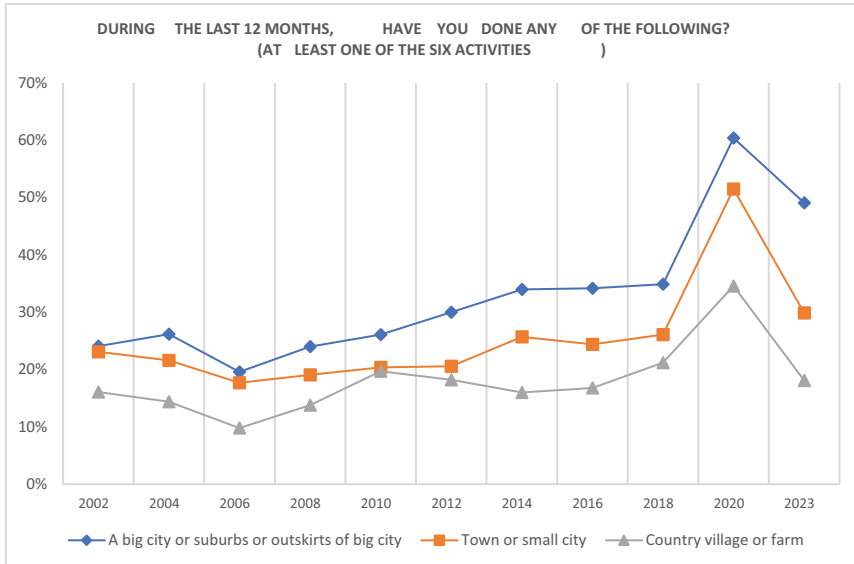


Figure 6. Civic activity by place of living. Source: ESS 2002–2023.

Still, the Polish rural population engages in various forms of social activities, which cannot be limited solely to involvement in third-sector activities. Moreover, the sector itself is very diverse. One of the principal divisions concerns the historical background of rural community organisations. The line runs between

422 The ESS10 round is dated 2020, but in Poland, it was conducted in the first half of 2022. Note that October 2020 saw mass protests against tightened abortion regulations in Poland. The large number of protesters could cause a considerable increase in civic activity because one of the questions concerns participation in legal demonstrations. The ESS collects information about various forms of civic activity with the question: ‘there are different ways of trying to improve things in Poland or help prevent things from going wrong. During the last 12 months, have you done any of the following?’ In each round in which Poland participated, the question listed six activities: a) contacted a politician or government official last 12 months, b) worked in another organisation or association last 12 months (2002–2018) or volunteered for not-for-profit or charitable organisation last 12 months (2020–2023), c) worn or displayed campaign badge/sticker last 12 months, d) signed a petition last 12 months, e) taken part in a lawful public demonstration last 12 months, f) boycotted certain products last 12 months.

old-type organisations, such as farm wives associations or volunteer fire brigades and new-type organisations established after the 1989 transformation.⁴²³

Farm wives associations were first established in the 1960s as auxiliaries to farmer associations. Their primary purpose was to educate on household nutrition and work hygiene. They offered aid to the local community during harvest by providing childcare, for example. In the time of the Polish People's Republic, they were appreciated for access to such commodities as feed. Many new such associations cropped up at that time.

Then, many were dissolved in the first years of the sociopolitical transformation. Farm wives associations were no longer the sole distributors of scarce commodities and could not withstand the competition from new non-governmental organisations. No regulations were provided to build a functional framework for the associations, including funding (the budget for hiring instructors for the associations was revoked).

Farm wives associations proliferated after Poland joined the European Union, which may be due to the availability of new funding for formalised NGOs and increased budget for rural infrastructure, including the restoration of village halls where farm wives associations are based. Local action groups emerged at the same time. They support rural NGOs financially and with consulting services. The Act of 9 November 2018 on farm wives associations further encouraged the registration of new associations by offering them funds from the governmental Agency for Restructurisation and Modernisation of Agriculture.

The associations exhibit low levels of economisation and professionalisation. Their main source of funds is member contributions. More than half of them receive support from municipal offices, mainly as subsidies. Today, farm wives associations have close ties with the local government. Their activity profile has been changing. Although modern farm wives associations draw on traditions from before 1989, their objectives diverge from those of the historical associations. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the associations were concerned with improving hygiene in households and on farms. Now, they focus on nurturing cultural heritage but are often reluctant to restore it in collaboration with ethnographers and historians. Their members engage in culinary projects, handicrafts, arts, folk bands or vocal groups. Sometimes, they are open to new activities, including tackling local social problems like domestic violence. Still, local folklore and popularisation of regional culinary culture, for example through village festivals, remain at the heart of their activities. Some associations provide services only to their members, while others address other social groups

423 Zajda 2022, pp. 46–48.

in the village, such as older people. Others still try to reach as many beneficiaries as possible.⁴²⁴

Another typical rural NGO is volunteer fire brigades. They operate as associations, but their legal framework is also provided by the Act of 24 August 1991 on fire protection. It regulates such matters as brigade funding. The sources include the central budget, local government budget, and insurance provider budgets. Due to public funding, volunteer fire brigades are sometimes excluded from the non-governmental sector or considered a specific part of the sector. They sit at the interface between the non-governmental and public sectors. Although close links to local governments ensure the financial stability of volunteer fire brigades, which is not typical of rural NGOs, it also leads to dependence on local authorities. Red tape surrounding the use of local government funds by volunteer fire brigades, excessive public administration bureaucracy, unclear rules of collaboration, and excessive administration control are problematic.⁴²⁵

Volunteer fire brigades are well-rooted in rural communities. More than half of them were established before the Second World War, and less than 40% in the Polish People's Republic. Rural communities are well familiar with volunteer fire brigades—and farm wives associations—which provide numerous public services as opposed to about 95% of Polish associations and foundations, which were established after 1989. Their activity is not limited to fire protection (especially as the number of fires has been declining) or road and water rescue. More than one-third (38%) educate adults and young generations. Virtually the same percentage (37%) support sports, tourism, recreation, and hobbies. Less than one-third (30%) engage in environmental protection stewardship, and a little fewer (28%) in culture and arts. Relatively few volunteer fire brigades declare involvement in social services and assistance (12%), aid to other organisations (11%), health protection (11%), and local development (10%). They have cadet brigades, wind bands, and dance groups. Their secondary activities other than those defined in the Act on fire protection are funded from diverse sources. The main ones are member contributions and local government subsidies, donations from businesses and individuals, donated 1.5% of income tax,⁴²⁶ fundraisers, and government administration. However, these sources provide only small amounts, below the average for rural organisations.⁴²⁷

The popularity of these organisations is increasing, attracting a growing number of rural residents. An average volunteer fire brigade has 37 members, although formal membership does not reflect actual engagement. Just like other

424 Zajda 2022, p. 49.

425 Adamiak/Biejat/ Charycka, 2016, p. 16.

426 In Poland, a taxpayer filing their annual tax return may donate 1.5% of their income tax to an NGO of their choice if it is listed as a public benefit organisation.

427 Adamiak/Biejat/ Charycka, 2016, p. 14.

rural NGOs, volunteer fire brigades face a passive membership problem and ossified management structures. It may be due to a shortage of volunteers for not-for-profit organisations and the leader-based management model found in about half of the organisations. A little more than one-third of volunteer fire brigades have a problem with leader burnout; nearly half need more volunteers, and 38% find it hard to retain valuable personnel. Almost one-fifth feel competitive pressure from other rural NGOs.⁴²⁸

The traditional organisations are great examples of typical rural associations, which are often informal, self-help structures founded on family, neighbour, and territorial ties. They had operated as completely grassroots projects without formalisation or funds for generations. New organisations established after 1989 are not as common and well-known to Polish rural communities. Some researchers believe the primary motive for the organisations is access to external funds to pursue their goals. Formalisation makes it easier to take action and positions the organisations as permanent actors, somehow rooted in the local community, which can help with local social problems.

The number of rural NGOs is unknown. One of the reasons is that they often suspend operations and fail to report closures to the National Court Register. The estimate is about 25 thousand registered associations and foundations (excluding volunteer fire brigades⁴²⁹).

Several characteristics are unique to rural NGOs. They operate mainly locally, in the municipality area (Poland's smallest administrative subdivision), promoting sports, tourism, hobbies, and local development. Their legal form is usually an association. They have fewer members than urban organisations (on average, 25 people vs 35), but their members are more active. The active share is estimated at 40%, while in cities, it is 29%. Those in rural organisations more often engage on a completely voluntary basis with no compensation.⁴³⁰ According to the Klon/Jawor association, 43% of rural organisations are volunteer-only, while in cities, it is only 34%. Twenty-eight per cent of rural organisations have permanent, paid staff (at least one person, not necessarily employed, 41% in cities). Rural organisations less frequently have permanent staff and experts. Sixty-nine per cent of rural organisations use volunteer work compared to 60% in city-based organisations.⁴³¹

Rural organisations more often use local government aid. They also more often source their funds from member contributions and in-kind donations from

428 Adamiak/Biejat/ Charycka, 2016, p. 16.

429 Charycka/Gumkowska/Arczewska 2020, p. 4

430 Charycka/Gumkowska/Arczewska 2020, p. 4.

431 Charycka/Gumkowska/Arczewska 2020, p. 7.

businesses and individuals. They are less likely to receive support from government sources, business activity or the 1.5% income tax donations.⁴³²

Note that NGOs may provide public services since 2003. Municipal governments⁴³³ typically transfer funds to NGOs through open tender competitions for public tasks. Still, representatives of the authorities believe that the partnership is hindered by the low level of professionalisation in NGOs and the shortage of tangible (equipment, facilities) and intangible assets, including knowledge on how to work together and experience with project implementation.⁴³⁴ Other analyses suggest that it is not the criterion of NGOs' human and financial resources that public institutions employ when partnering with them. Katarzyna Zajda and Damian Mazurek⁴³⁵ wrote: *Public institutions in post-socialist Poland continue to pit themselves against other social actors who can help solve local social problems. They undervalue their resources, even if they are aware that they exist. They put themselves in the role of the entity with more valuable resources. Thus, they are admonished to use the resources of other entities, including those of NGOs, which exemplifies the lack of a cooperative culture among them. In other words, in post-socialist countries such as Poland, cooperation is first limited because of the specificity of the relationship between public institutions and NGOs; second, it is not solely dependent on the level of human and financial resources of NGOs.*

Scholars further point out the issue of low levels of collaboration among rural NGOs, which often depend on local government funding and consider other associations and foundations as competitors.⁴³⁶ In other words, the rural community collaboration indicator in the form of the rural NGO sector is very diversified, sometimes divided, and incapable of inter- and intra-sectoral cooperation.

The research on the Polish rural community investigated various forms of formal and informal activity, from neighbourly assistance to associations.

They are interconnected and cluster into three characteristic dimensions.⁴³⁷ The first one, 'tangible and financial aid', includes charity donations, in-kind donations, food sharing, car sharing, and resident meeting participation. These activities are the most popular, although they vary in this regard as well. Still, almost all the respondents (96.7%) engaged in at least one.

432 Charycka/Gumkowska/Arczewska 2020, p. 8.

433 The municipality is the smallest administrative subdivision in Poland.

434 Adamiak/Biejat/Charycka 2013, p. 111.

435 Zajda/Mazurek 2023, p. 634.

436 Goszczyński / Kamiński / Knieć 2013, pp. 101–102.

437 The dimensions were identified with hierarchical clustering using Ward's method as an agglomeration metric and squared Euclidean distance and the distance metric.

The second dimension, ‘supporting services’, encompasses free house/pet sitting for neighbours, free services for schools, parishes, and babysitting. These activities are more time-consuming. They also involve more commitment and trust. Perhaps this is why they are less popular. Still, three out of four respondents (76.6%) declared at least one such activity.

Rural residents are the least eager to engage in ‘associational activities’, which means membership in local NGOs, volunteer fire brigades or farm wives associations. Over a quarter of the respondents (28.2%) are involved in at least one of the three organisations. No significant differences in social activity engagement were found between those who trust others and those who deal with others with caution. Significantly more trusting persons engage in such activities as in-kind help or work for a school or parish, although the associations are weak. Nevertheless, cautious people are more numerous in farm wives associations than trusting individuals (Tab. 27). Engagement in activities belonging to any dimension does not correlate with generalised trust.

Table 27. Forms and dimensions of social activity [%]

| Form of activity | Popularity of the form of activity | Generalised trust (% of trusting, -% of cautious) | Activity dimension | Engagement in any activity in the dimension |
|---|------------------------------------|---|--------------------|---|
| Charitable donations | 82.1 | +3.6 | I | 96.7 |
| Proposing or receiving car sharing to commute, for a doctor’s appointment, etc. | 71.3 | +0.2 | I | |
| Participation in a village or other resident meeting | 64.5 | +2.9 | I | |
| Provision of in-kind aid to rural communities | 62.5 | +6.2* | I | |
| Sharing food | 55.6 | +0.1 | I | |
| Free house/pet sitting | 48.2 | +7.7* | II | 76.6 |
| Work for the school | 40.4 | +6.2* | II | |
| Work for the parish | 37.9 | +7.8* | II | |
| Free babysitting or companionship for older people (outside family) for other residents | 28.9 | +3.1 | II | |
| Local NGO membership | 13.7 | +2.8 | III | 28.2 |
| Volunteer fire brigade membership | 11.6 | -0.4 | III | |
| Farm wives association membership | 8.9 | -3.4* | III | |

* statistically significant differences for $p < 0.05$.

Common hobbies, interests, or beliefs encourage participation in various virtual collectives.⁴³⁸ This form of activity among the rural population must not be disregarded in the age of information society, even though urban residents use the Internet more often. Note that over three-quarters of adult Poles (77%) used the Internet in 2024: fewer rural residents (68%) than city inhabitants (96%). Internet use grew with the local population size. Online presence depended mostly on age, but older respondents were differentiated by education.⁴³⁹

According to the Centre for Public Opinion Research, Poles use the Internet mostly for shopping and selling, as well as for such services as online banking, social media, and streaming platforms.⁴⁴⁰

The present research searched for new forms of rural population activities and identified their participation in virtual collectives. About one-third (34.9%) of rural residents belong to a virtual collective. Women are significantly⁴⁴¹ more often members of such collectives than men (37.4% vs 32.3%). Respondents aged 35–44 (43.4%) outnumber those aged 45–59 (39.8%), 25–34 (39.4%), 18–24 (34.6%), and the oldest group, over 60 years of age (20.8%). More economically active people (38.5%) are online than those with other sources of income (25.5%). In terms of marital status, divorcees (43.1%) surf more than unmarried people (37.7%), married couples (34.3%), and widowers (24.4%). Graduates of post-secondary schools (48.4%) more commonly join online collectives than people with higher education (41.8%). Participation in online groups declines with the level of education. The participation rate among high school graduates is 30.5%, for people with vocational education, it is 24.8%, and for those with primary education, the activity level is 15.4%. People from cities are more prevalent in online groups (42%) than those from the countryside (32.8%).

The most common type of activity is hobby groups. It was declared by two-thirds of the respondents (69.1%). Professional groups are relatively popular, although not as much (43.9%). About every fifth respondent belongs to a neighbourhood online group (22.1%) or ‘other’ group (17.2%). One out of ten Internet users represents a help or self-help group (11.2%), or a political online collective (10.1%). Religious groups are the least popular (6.4%).

In terms of generalised trust, there are some minor, statistically insignificant, positive differences between trusting and cautious respondents (with one exception) (Tab. 28).

438 Putnam 2008, p. 301.

439 Only a quarter of the oldest respondents used the Internet. The respondents with a university diploma used the Internet the most, while those with primary and vocational education used it the least, possibly because the two latter groups are, on average, older than the others.

440 Feliksiak 2024, p. 3.

441 The significance of differences was measured with Cramer’s V for $p < 0.05$.

Table 28. Members of online groups [%]

| Online group | Participants | Generalised trust (% of trusting, -% of cautious) |
|--------------------------|--------------|---|
| hobbyists | 69.1 | -1.9 |
| professionals | 43.9 | -0.5 |
| neighbours | 22.1 | +0.5 |
| help or self-help | 11.2 | +3.7 |
| political | 10.1 | +0.4 |
| religious/church-related | 6.4 | +1.5 |
| other | 17.2 | +3.2 |

Note: the percentages do not add up to 100 because the questions are multiple-answer questions.

The Polish rural population today is interested in participating in online collectives. One-third engage in this activity. Participation is voluntary and preference-driven. The collectives have no structures in the traditional sense. Not all of them can be categorised as communities because they are not permanent and lack member control mechanisms. They are based mainly on emotions, tastes, and shared interests and are incapable of replacing traditional institutions such as neighbourly assistance. Still, they improve the options for social participation and open rural residents to supra-local networks, which is important for social capital building.

3.4 Summary

The possibilities of elevating social capital have varied throughout the modern history of Poland. The discussion about how to shape civic society has matured since the strike actions of the early 1980s and the increasing activity of the Solidarność social movement. At first, it started in closed groups away from the authorities' eyes as part of underground activities, mostly among intellectuals, artists, and activists from large facilities. Then, it spread to large factories, where not only urban labourers worked, and finally to the streets.⁴⁴²

Legal barriers to social activity were abolished after 1989. The transformation in Poland involved not only the political and economic systems but also attitudes, norms, and values in society. The development of civic society was far from easy. Poles were far from ready to be citizens and partners for the authorities. The local government reform boosted democratisation. Its first stage in 1990 was to restore

⁴⁴² Karwińska 2008, pp. 116–117.

the institution of local government at the level of municipality.⁴⁴³ The municipality (*gmina*) became the smallest subdivision, a socio-spatial system where urban and rural residents' everyday lives happen. After some time, it was possible to include the communities in the institutional development of the municipality, for example, through public consultation, a debate involving authorities and residents about all important matters.

Even after all those years, social participation remains more popular among the urban population in Poland. There, the idea of including society in the decision-making process has advocates among practitioners who pressure local authorities.⁴⁴⁴ Nevertheless, many local governments still merely pretend to engage in these activities.⁴⁴⁵ Sometimes, consultations are a mockery of social participation.⁴⁴⁶ Many problems with implementing good governance principles at the local level can be attributed to the social capital resources of local communities.

The study demonstrates that members of the Polish rural population:

1. are distrustful of others (only one-third of the respondents believed most people could be trusted);
2. trust mostly their immediate and extended family, neighbours, and colleagues;
3. approve primarily of such values as integrity, health, security, freedom, peaceful life, friendship, work, having children, respect, and marriage;
4. value education, money, faith/religion, and adventurous life the least;
5. are seldom lonely (only 3.1% declared having no friends);
6. maintain good neighbour relationships, and most of them offer small favours, such as lending things or house sitting (83.1%);
7. are involved in informal social networks, especially in emergencies;
8. participate in virtual collectives, mostly related to hobbies;
9. engage in informal activities rather than formal associational efforts that can be either traditional (volunteer fire brigades and farm wives associations) or 'modern' (such NGOs as associations and foundations).

443 The second stage was the establishment of district (*powiat*) and voivodeship (*województwo*) local governments. H. Izdebski, *Samorząd terytorialny. Podstawy ustroju i działalności [Local Government. System and Functioning]*, Warsaw 2014.

444 Brzeziński/Kretek – Kamińska, Krzewińska/ Zajac 2024, p. 60.

445 Officials hold social consultations or engage in other social participation mechanisms only reluctantly. They are discouraged by financial issues (no budget for such activities), problems reaching and captivating potential participants, and the flow of the meetings: conflicts between participants, dominant participants, low moderation skills, off-topic input, diverging opinions, etc. Some officials consider consultations a sorry and emotionally difficult burden.

446 Brzeziński/Kretek-Kamińska/Krzewińska/ Zajac 2024, p. 11.

Hence, rural social capital resources are found primarily in social microstructures. Its development on the mezo- and macro-social levels is more intricate due to factors such as the different types of ties between the individual and community, the dispersion of group interests, and the multiplicity and diversity of secondary groups exhibiting different preferences, values, and attitudes.⁴⁴⁷ The study emphasised the importance of neighbours, especially the closest ones, in rural life. The popularity of rural self-help is an example of the continued strength of social ties founded on a sense of shared territory. The Polish countryside still preserves the traditional social organisations that complemented the informal neighbour support networks with their formalised approaches. After the 1990s, organisations of a new type emerged, although not as profoundly as in cities. They are usually driven by the voluntary efforts of their members. In fact, they were not very numerous at the first stage of the transformation. Rural areas were a buffer for surging unemployment, which led to social problems detrimental to the development of a culture of trust and formalised social activity.

It will take generations to transform the culture of distrust into a culture of trust, if it is at all possible. The latest history of Poland clearly shows the relationship between rural social capital resources and the public functioning of rural residents, including their political choices. Rural communities were considered followers of a right-wing Law and Justice party, which promoted Catholic values and a welfare state.⁴⁴⁸ Social transfers improved their support mostly among the financially disadvantaged, with lower education, susceptible to manipulation based on social distrust or its substitutes, like conspiracy theories. In other words, knowledge of rural social capital resources can largely account for the support of such governments. In a broader context, it is useful for determining the potential of social changes on the macro-social level, where processes of international relevance take place, determining Poland's part in the European Union, for example.

447 Karwińska 2008, p. 116.

448 Bartoszek 2022, p. 176.

Chapter IV.

Changes in quality of life in the Polish countryside as perceived by local leaders

Several moments in the history of Poland had an unprecedented impact on the countryside. The most recent of these were the year 1989, which marked the fall of the communist (socialist) system, and Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004.

The integration (along with the financial resources it mobilised) has significantly changed the standards of living for Polish rural communities. It also strengthened the democratisation processes that started in the 1990s, leading to a new quality of social capital. In the present publication on the Polish countryside in transition today, the authors zoom in on selected changes in the quality of life, including social capital. This chapter offers a perspective of leaders of local action groups. These are partnerships of organisations from three sectors: public, social, and business.

They first sprang up in the early twenty-first century and boomed after the 2004 accession. Their abundance contributed to the implementation of the LEADER+ pilot programme.⁴⁴⁹ Under the programme, local action groups started to deploy development strategies according to the LEADER method (French *Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale*). These strategies aimed to stimulate the activity of local communities, in line with the *a priori* assumption proposed by Pascal Chevalier and Marie-Claude Maurel⁴⁵⁰ that the rural community is capable of discovering what is best suited to their environment, culture, and traditions.⁴⁵¹

449 Zajda, 2014.

450 Chevalier / Claude Maurel, 2010, p. 30.

451 The method framework includes:

- 1) territoriality (support for activities for an area that is coherent in terms of natural environment, economy, and society, taking into account its characteristics);
- 2) bottom-up approach (rural communities are involved in action planning and implementation);
- 3) integration (actions are coordinated and aimed at comprehensive rural development rather than supporting a single sector);
- 4) local funding and management;

The first LEADER period yielded about two hundred local action groups. The number changed in the second programming period (2007–2013). Local development strategies were implemented by 336 local action groups. The strategies could be aimed at improving rural standards of living, increasing economic diversity, creating new jobs, reinforcing social capital, or better preserving and using cultural and natural heritage. Furthermore, the organisations supported applicants from the partnership areas in projects under axis 3 of the Rural Development Programme ‘Quality of life in rural areas and diversification of rural economy’.⁴⁵² From 2014 to 2020, 292 local action groups implemented local development strategies. They stepped up efforts for increased employment, new jobs, poverty and social exclusion prevention, development of the social economy, and employment support for underprivileged groups.⁴⁵³

Irrespective of the programming period, local action groups supported rural life quality transitions, including within the social capital of the residents. The insights into the opinions of representatives of regional local action group networks, bringing together regional (voivodeship) actors, complement and deepen the outlook offered in the previous chapters.

4.1 Perceived and expected changes in rural infrastructure and social services

The quantitative research reported in the monograph demonstrates that rural residents in Poland are satisfied with living in their village, particularly in terms of standards of living. Their households have the necessary amenities (toilet, central heating, or municipal water supply). The interviewees have confirmed the above conclusions. They acknowledge the impact of EU integration on improved rural standards of living over the last twenty years. As one of them pointed out, *There is no such thing as a less-developed village today. Today, there are tele-*

5) partnering (representatives of the three sectors collaborate for rural development);

6) cooperation and networking (local action groups should cooperate with other actors from the area of interest and outside it);

7) innovation (Zajda, 2011, pp. 60–61).

452 Additionally, local action groups supported applicants under ‘small projects’. These could concern training and workshops for inhabitants of the partner area, cultural and sports events, promotion of local activities, improving the quality of local products and services, preservation or restoration of natural or cultural heritage, or construction and repairs of tourist park and street furniture. Cooperation projects were another area of activity of local action groups from 2007 to 2013. Very often, these were the first projects with formalised cooperation. The typical partner was a well-known local action group with similar development goals and situated nearby (in the same voivodeship for national-level projects).

453 Zajda, 2022.

phones and the Internet everywhere. Today, people in the countryside have houses and laugh at people in cities who live in two cramped rooms and look out from their concrete balconies straight down. I think, today, the countryside is really something. There used to be no sewerage, no toilet, no water (I7).

The representatives of local action groups appreciate the impact of the infrastructural projects implemented over the years to improve standards of living and develop local social capital. These are mainly village halls designed for members of local NGOs (such as farm wives associations) and those looking for a place to spend leisure time or hold a family event. One interviewee shared, *Over the years, the halls were first built with funds from local action groups. Actually, I think (...) there are not many villages today without a village hall. Already back in the previous horizon, we focused more on using the halls (I1).* The mere presence of the halls does not mean they are used daily. Sometimes, the maintenance costs are so high (electricity and heating) that the buildings are closed and unavailable unless the person is willing to pay to rent the place. Even local governments often cannot afford the maintenance costs. Additionally, people have problems coming up with ideas on how to use the new or renovated space and make it available to residents. According to the interviewees, sometimes access is restricted, for example, for the youth, lest the place gets vandalised. One interviewee emphasised, *(...) some halls are empty. So it's not that the projects are failures. It's more that people don't know what to do with them. It's a bigger problem, so to speak (I1).*

Other rural infrastructural projects that the interviewees believe have improved standards of living that were designed to foster social capital include playgrounds and intergenerational playspaces, where children's infrastructure was complemented with an outdoor gym, benches, and sometimes tables. These are places to spend time with family and neighbours. In the case of these projects, the interviewees also admitted that not all of them turned out to be needed. Some are unused, especially those in locations not associated with recreation (such as near a church or in front of a municipal administration office). Some projects, such as the construction of an outdoor gym, were not consulted with residents but were decided by the village head (as the community representative) as a tangible token of their efforts to provide the community with infrastructure. One interviewee shared, *Above all, the outdoor gyms were the failed dreams of village heads. What's the best way to sum up their term? Build an outdoor gym! Let everyone see they got something done (I7).* The participants shared more less-than-successful projects: community centres or playfields for children and teenagers. Sometimes, the main reason for their construction was the availability of funds. The facilities were designed and installed without considering who could use them and how. In the words of one interviewee, *There are two such projects, like, linked to sports. In one place, they have three sports fields. Money*

was available, and so it was used. Another thing which is not always used for the good of the public is building community centres everywhere. These projects are big, and sometimes the centres are not used because there is no money to pay trainers or instructors (I5). Failure to consult with the public resulted in some buildings being unused. Others lack sanitary facilities or other amenities, which severely limits their potential use. Examples include playgrounds without toilets or multisport fields with no sanitary facilities. One of the interviewees shared the perspective of young people from rural areas she knew, *They have access to the Internet on their phones. They have virtually unlimited access to the world through new technologies and so on. They can handle it. What they do not have is an alternative. They pointed out to us that they had no place to meet up. Even if they meet at the multisport field, it's because they have no other option ... One of them boys told me, We will manage, but where should the girls go? (I7)*. Another example of projects that were not consulted with potential users is sports fields, which children and youth are afraid to use for fear of being accused of damaging the facility. Adult supervision is not always the way to go, especially for young adults who prefer being independent. One interviewee commented, *They are afraid of going there, I think, because it is so sleek, so perfect. They worry they could damage something because there's this top-shelf mat, nice benches, and everything first class there. Sometimes, I get the feeling there's this competition among local governments to have the biggest, the best, the most modern facilities, and they overlook the social needs, don't ask the residents. Public consultation is something local governments have to learn, for sure (I7)*.

According to the interviews, rural transport has to be improved. State-controlled passenger road transport systems were dismantled after the socio-economic transformation and the shift towards a free-market economy. They were replaced by private operators who quickly verified the economic feasibility of the lines. Those with sufficient passenger volume were maintained, while those in sparsely populated areas that generated only slight profit were discontinued. This has led to an increased rural transport exclusion, with communities relying more heavily on private car transport. The transport divide has limited the availability of social services, labour markets, education, culture, and entertainment. About 20% of Polish villages are estimated to be mobility deserts with no public transport. Many others have only two connections per day.⁴⁵⁴ Bus schedules (one connection early in the morning and one in the afternoon or evening, for example) may limit job opportunities, education, and access to social services (health care, banks, culture centres). In addition, the lack of connections between villages hinders the development of social capital within communities, as their members cannot meet and engage in joint endeavours

454 Rosner / Stanny, 2016.

because of transport exclusion. Therefore, transport exclusion affects not only rural living standards but also the resources available to the community, including social capital.⁴⁵⁵

Children, youth, and seniors are the most at risk of transport exclusion.^{456,457} Primary education is usually provided within the municipality where the children live. The school is typically located in the same village or elsewhere within walking, cycling or driving distance. Sometimes transport is provided by the local government (especially when the school admits children from various villages). Secondary education requires young people to commute to a nearby town or city. After the eighth grade of primary school, pupils must use private or public transport to get to school. Transport exclusion affects the choice of school and opportunities to take extra-curricular classes, pursue hobbies, or spend free time with peers after school. One of the participants illustrated the problem vividly, *Speaking of fundamental problems, there's the issue of mobility. The area is not as focused on farming anymore. More people live here, but there is no work, or farming is just a side hustle. Most residents are mobile. They drive cars, and there is no alternative transport. This means young people are completely grounded and dependent on their parents. So, if I want to go out, meet somebody, I have to ask mum or dad to pick me up because there is no way to come back. There are no bicycle paths or safe crossings allowing children to use bikes for transport. Also, there is no cycling culture, unfortunately. Children feel grounded in the countryside. They feel like they do not have the freedom they see in TV shows: someone going out, having fun, coming back because they are shut-in* (17).

With no option to return home after attending classes in a nearby city, young people are forced to move and often end up staying there. Transport accessibility also affects the choice of university and studies. More often than not, students pick universities closer to home regardless of whether it is their dream field of study. Young people from rural areas seldom choose prestigious universities, also considering the cost of living in a city. About 30% of students are estimated to come back to rural areas for various reasons.⁴⁵⁸ Those returning are typically minimalists who consider the countryside a cheaper place to live than the city. They are not career-driven, and any job is good enough for them. 'Dreamers' or those extremely ambitious are less likely to return, particularly if the rural labour market offers limited opportunities for professional development, no remote work, and a strenuous commute.⁴⁵⁹ One interviewee shared, *There is this village, for example, with good transport links, which is a great place for young people to*

455 Gray / Shaw / Farrington, 2006.

456 Białobrzieszka, 2022.

457 Elvy, 2014.

458 Matysiak, 2018.

459 Ibidem.

live. Then, some villages are really hard to get out of. These kids leave for high school, boarding school and visit home at weekends only, really. They are pulled away from the countryside. (...) Some places in our area are inaccessible by public transport, so it's hard to call them good places to live, right? Until you get a driving licence, which gives you some mobility (I1). The local labour market is not the only determinant of whether young people return to the countryside after completing their education. Social capital is also relevant here, particularly those resources linked to the family: bonds with the immediate family and internalised norms and values related to relationships among family members, including care, especially of older parents. Resources at the level of social mezzostucture are also relevant: ties to the land and neighbour ties. Returning young adults often face the social stigma of being losers who had to return home after failing in the city (because they could not find stable employment, for example) or because of family ties they considered more important than their plans and aspirations. In other words, the countryside (not only in Poland) is still perceived as a place where those who have failed elsewhere work and live.⁴⁶⁰⁴⁶¹

Local governments are expected to invest in rural transport infrastructure, both roads and public transport. Still, they make it clear that the costs are impossible, simply too high, considering the population density of rural areas. Furthermore, the interviewees suggest that the authorities are concerned with children and youth mainly as pupils of local schools, which are the responsibility of local governments. They are obliged to facilitate transport to local schools. They are held accountable when parents vote in local elections (both the mayor, as the executive branch, and the councillors, the legislature, are elected once every four years). Once young people have completed their primary education and moved on to secondary schools, which are run by the districts, the local government is no longer interested in their fate. As one interviewee put it, *Sadly, local governments see young people as a problem. Children who finish primary schools in rural areas are off the radar of the local authorities. Most often, they really move to the district capital to go to secondary school and become a problem. They're a liability rather than an asset for the local government (I1).*

The other group at risk of transport exclusion are seniors. They do not migrate to urban centres, where many specialist services, such as health care services, are available, as often as young people do.⁴⁶² Rural municipalities tend to have one primary health care facility with a selection of specialist physicians or no specialists at all. Obviously, the healthcare needs of this age group are higher. The primary factors distinguishing the accessibility of social services to rural resi-

460 Matysiak, 2021.

461 Stockdale / Ferguson, 2020.

462 Białobrzeska, 2022.

dents are the state of inter- and intra-municipal public transport and the distances people have to travel to reach public services outside their municipality.⁴⁶³

The transport exclusion affects how seniors (and other rural residents) can access cultural services. They are less available in the countryside than in towns and cities. Cultural opportunities are facilitated mainly by cultural centres, including their divisions like senior clubs or libraries, and sometimes NGOs like farm wives associations. Rural parish activities are also relevant in this context. They hold parish festivals, trips (especially for parish movement members), and biblical reenactments related to religious celebrations.⁴⁶⁴ The primary consumers of these services are individuals who are socially active and physically fit. Therefore, the transport accessibility of the cultural centres, senior clubs, libraries, or village halls, where farm wives associations are most often located, is of critical importance. Even if the institution is situated in the same village, senior citizens may have problems reaching it on foot or by bicycle due to health issues. They have to get to the bus stop somehow, even if it is only a few hundred metres away.⁴⁶⁵ In other words, transport accessibility is more than just the existence of public transport connections. It includes transport dedicated to passengers with special transport needs as well, such as municipal buses to the cultural centre for seniors on selected days. Research commissioned by the Polish Ombudsman suggests that transport barriers can be removed by improving public transport and offering it in more individualised forms. Rural residents expect a sufficiently dense transport network, timetables accommodating the needs of diverse groups (not only schoolchildren and economically active residents), good bus conditions, buses adapted to the needs of less able passengers, and discounts. A common suggestion for individualised transport (such as door-to-door service) is to have minibuses that could transport small groups of seniors to health care facilities, for example.⁴⁶⁶

Rural communities expect more mobile services, which are services provided at the customer's home. Examples include mobile medical diagnostics or bookmobiles. They also anticipate more remote services, which is linked to the quality of the Internet connection and attitudes towards new technologies, especially among seniors.⁴⁶⁷ Although focused on urban environments, the fourth industrial revolution has also affected rural areas. The self-perpetuating technology development can change the way people live, work, and relax. It is linked to the Internet of Things, robotics, artificial intelligence (AI), autonomous

463 Szatur-Jaworska, 2024, p. 22.

464 Walczak / Jewdokimow / Pazderski, 2016.

465 Rosochacka-Gmitrzak / Tokarz-Kamińska, 2024.

466 Szatur-Jaworska 2024.

467 Ibidem.

vehicles, and 3D printing.⁴⁶⁸ As Cowie and colleagues⁴⁶⁹ noted, the revolution discourse has hitherto marginalised the countryside. Many technologies target problems typical of cities, which are completely different from rural challenges. Such issues as low population density (hindering social services and participation) and the ageing population, leading to limited capabilities to adapt to new technologies, are more prevalent in the countryside. Some even perceive it as a place to run away from technology.

The Polish countryside is connected to the Internet. The survey results suggest that 97% of the respondents declared having access to the Internet (see Chapter II). Most households with Internet access use fibre optics (60%), a quarter use mobile connectivity (24.5%), and 15% resort to radio links. Still, access alone does not mean people use the Internet. Adult rural residents in Poland fail to take advantage of the diverse opportunities offered by the Internet compared to other rural EU citizens. They rarely book doctor appointments, participate in courses, or consume educational materials online.⁴⁷⁰ For them, the Internet is a source of entertainment (music and films), a communication tool (e-mail and social media), and a place to search for news and information and shop. The modes of use are determined mainly by age and education. The most diversified Internet use landscape was found among younger groups with higher education.⁴⁷¹ Older people are less interested in the most popular online activities.⁴⁷²

Some Poles are worried about artificial intelligence (AI). About 40% see more threats than opportunities in AI development, with nearly one-third declaring ambiguous perceptions. The primary concern cited by 73% of rural residents is the potential loss of jobs. Other major threats include surveillance and crime growth, disruption and manipulation, and loss of control over AI.⁴⁷³ The usefulness of new technologies, such as online public administration, does not convince the rural population, particularly seniors, as they do not see them used in their daily lives.⁴⁷⁴ Rural community leaders are aware of the concerns and difficulties with changing seniors' attitudes towards new technologies. One interviewee shared, *I have great concerns, but I'm from the generation that's not so keen to learn. I know there is no turning back in some aspects. I think it accelerated during the pandemic, it became a new normal to use the Internet and send or receive documents* (I6). On the other hand, according to the interviewees, access to broadband Internet determines the growth of rural social services, expansion

468 Corfe, 2018.

469 Cowie / Townsend / Saleminck, 2020.

470 Piekut / Rybaltowicz, 2024.

471 Walczak / Jewdokimow / Pazderski, 2016.

472 Orłowska / Błęzyńska, 2020.

473 Umańska / Augustyniak-Brzezińska, 2024.

474 Komorowski / Stanny, 2020.

of the labour market for the local (young) population, and attractiveness to urban immigrants. As one interviewee put it, *Let me just repeat that fibre optics, high-speed Internet will be the deciding factor. There's only so much we can say. People often ask me if I know about any houses to buy in a village they like. But is the Internet connection good? But will it have fibre optics? And so on, and so forth. In other words, for digital technologies to make sense and attract a completely different kind of residents, young people, broadband Internet is a must. AI is just a secondary thing. If the Internet connection is good, people will use AI* (13). According to the countryside leaders, investments in digital infrastructure are as necessary as transport projects, despite the concerns of some residents. They boost the labour market, especially businesses that sell online. They also expand communication opportunities for residents who may not always be able to meet in real life. The digital space has support networks that help combat social isolation.⁴⁷⁵ Artificial intelligence could help organise joint events, unite people with diversified interests, and enhance social bonds.⁴⁷⁶ The interviewed local action group leaders could not imagine cooperation among local leaders and finding information about funding for joint endeavours without Internet access. Non-governmental organisations have to be networked with each other. Shared websites and platforms for NGOs encourage the activity of even small associations. One interviewee shared, *It makes things easier. People are not as afraid of the national court register,⁴⁷⁷ tax office, or anything like that. It is easier to encourage people to set up a formal association when they can read things online. There's this famous website for NGOs. It's a source of information for many organisations. I see significant progress in the growth of the organisations* (18).

The rural community leaders emphasised that investments in digital infrastructure should be made in parallel with investments in human capital, knowledge, competencies, and skills to use it. One interviewee emphasised, *I could give you loads of examples of people fighting to get fibre optic access in the village, but none of people protesting it. What is missing are digital skills, digital hygiene, and online security. People sometimes make stupid mistakes. True, more and more of us see the benefits of digital solutions. Also in rural areas. Planning, checking, or learning about things at home* (18). Conscientious and careful use of AI and other online resources may reduce the scale of cyberviolence and treating the virtual world as a substitute for the real one, especially among young rural residents. The concerns rural leaders have with AI and social media boil down to the fragmentation of social ties. One of them admitted, *This generation will build us in*

475 Awan / Gauntlett, 2013.

476 Carver / Beamish / Phillips / Villeneuve, 2018.

477 This institution maintains the official registry of associations. To register their activity, associations have to fill out many forms. Help from NGOs that have completed this process makes it easier for new associations.

a way. But I am concerned. I believe a personal connection is still the most important thing. It shouldn't be limited to phones, YouTube, and other things. That's not the point. At least that's how I see it (I6). Digital literacy can be acquired through high-quality educational services, which are often lacking in the rural setting. Schools are shut down in remote areas due to depopulation. Local governments cut costs and prefer transporting children from various villages to a single school. Online education is not a fully viable solution. It requires digital skills and competencies along with a computer or other terminal, removes any direct contact with others, and necessitates a dedicated space where the participant can focus on learning.⁴⁷⁸

According to the interviewed local action group leaders, neither digitalisation nor new communication technologies would change the way the oldest villagers access information, for example. They still appreciate hard copy announcements on boards, poles, and shop windows, as well as the traditional canvassing by the village head when they visit each house or share written documents to be passed around. Still, the most popular dissemination mechanism in the Polish countryside is the grapevine, announcements read in church, and a local news-sheet.⁴⁷⁹ Reluctance to change old habits leads to digital exclusion, which affects the oldest seniors the most. One interviewee shared, *Sometimes, when something requires signing up or registering, I see the terrible exclusion of older people. First, they don't know how to do it and have no one around to help them. My neighbour often comes to me, and we fill out forms together. But when you don't have neighbours to help you out, you really are underprivileged. Today, pretty much everything is done online* (I4).

According to the rural leaders, the residents expect new projects aimed at younger groups in light of the demographic issues. The Polish countryside (and others in Europe, too) undergoes deruralisation. As experts in the field, Andrzej Rosner and Monika Wesołowska emphasised,⁴⁸⁰ although there is no single deruralisation pattern, every European country went through an episode of rural population shrinkage after the Second World War. Population dynamics were influenced by such factors as location, models of agrarian changes and development of non-agricultural services, and access to infrastructure and social services. Poland's population grew from 25.035 million in 1950 to 38.383 million in 2019, but mostly in urban areas. The primary causes of rural-to-urban migration after the Second World War were economic in nature. They were mainly related to overpopulation of the countryside, problems restoring agricultural holdings, and low farming income due to small holding sizes. Young rural res-

478 Kalinowski, 2023, p. 76.

479 Rosochacka-Gmitrzak / Tokarz-Kamińska, 2024.

480 Rosner / Wesołowska, 2022.

idents moved to the city to find jobs and conditions that would meet their basic needs. The 1990s saw migration in search of a better quality of life in terms of access to education and culture, and opportunities for professional and social advancement. Today, two-thirds of rural municipalities in Poland suffer from an actual decrease caused equally by negative natural increase rate and negative net migration. In the remaining one-third, the population is increasing, mainly due to high net migration. These are primarily suburban municipalities near voivodeship capitals.⁴⁸¹ The vicious circle of underdevelopment, in which limited local labour market resources and dwindling social infrastructure continue to deteriorate, leading to more social problems and—eventually—depopulation, is increasingly common in peripheral villages. Most Polish villages located further from towns or with difficult access typically have a negative net migration. The minuscule natural increase rate and ageing of the rural population further exacerbate the problem. Demographic forecasts show that the trend of declining rural population in remote villages will continue.⁴⁸²

The interviewed rural community leaders recognise the demographic problems of the Polish countryside. In response, they propose urgent projects for the near future. The first is to provide meeting places for young people. As one interviewee emphasised, *I think we need meeting spots strictly for the youth, where they could feel at home, and no one would chase them away or complain about them meeting there. At the moment, they tend to meet at bus stops, stadiums, and sports fields* (I1). Other objects, like village halls, are not considered places for the youth, who are often perceived as a problematic and somewhat troublesome group of residents, sometimes threatening others or the public order. One of the interviewees painted a vivid picture, *When it comes to attitudes towards the youth, they are seen as a bit of a nuisance. When we discuss the landscaping of some area, and I say 'We'll put a bench here', somebody goes 'No, we won't, because young people will gather there'. And this is the general mindset: young people disturb, gather in groups, make a mess, lie, and destroy'* (I1). Places designed for youth's spare time activities and integration with peers come with the added value of improving their image. They will no longer be perceived as a threat and nuisance but as active and organised members of society. The perception of the countryside among the youth will also improve.

Another investment that could attract or retain young people in the countryside is early education for the youngest children, such as crèches. The interviewees noted that young people who 'already earned a bit and want to raise their small children and look for peace and quiet' return to the countryside (I7). Diversified social services can attract them to rural areas, which are still generally

481 Stanny/ Rosner, 2024.

482 Rosner/ Wesołowska, 2022.

associated with more physical security and a house with a garden where children can spend time with parents and grandparents.⁴⁸³

The leaders also acknowledged the need to do something for older rural residents, such as the transport, digital infrastructure, and education projects discussed above. Still, they emphasised that this group is fairly well cared for by local authorities, support institutions (such as welfare centres), and NGOs. Such societies as farm wives associations or senior clubs are often run by active seniors, often community leaders (e.g. retired teachers), who look for opportunities to associate and spend their spare time actively. Older people frequently become councillors, members of the municipal legislature, which empowers them to directly influence municipal investment projects. One interviewee shared, *I think seniors are the group that's the best taken care of. Senior clubs are being established, although partially because state funds were made available to pay for senior clubs in day care homes. Even if there is no senior club as such, (...) some people are ready to do something for themselves and the retirees' community. It is true for basically all municipalities in my local action group. I see mini clubs, branches of retiree associations, or independent municipal senior associations in libraries or community centres (I1).*

4.2 Perceived and expected changes in the social capital of the Polish countryside

The Polish countryside has changed in various domains over the last decades. Some changes are more conspicuous than others. It is easier to see new roads, pavements, renovated schools, health centres, village halls, or such standard household amenities as running water, washing machines, or toilets. Changes in social capital are much harder to recognise: the potential for cooperation, norms and values, or trust towards the immediate surroundings, strangers, and institutions. In addition, social capital resources are not transformed concurrently. As demonstrated in Chapter III, social trust among Poles is evolving slowly. It is primarily due to a historically rooted culture of distrust founded on a volatile social order and a lack of normative cohesion and transparency in public institutions and organisations. The evolution of norms and values is similarly gradual. On the level of social consciousness, the changes are seen mainly in the young rural population, who are becoming more critical of marriage or the Catholic Church, for example. Changes in social activities are occurring at a faster pace, especially with regard to joining NGOs.

483 Głowacki, 2024.

Accession to the European Union stimulated changes in the status of the rural non-government sector. Associations (and sometimes foundations) have become more visible in the countryside over the last 20 years. They are set up by social activists, often linked to various local organisations and institutions. For example, teachers can form an association to obtain additional funding to empower pupils in their schools. Employees of community centres also often create senior clubs or other thematic clubs for the residents and fund them with money that is sometimes easier to acquire for small NGOs than bureaucratic local public institutions.⁴⁸⁴

New divisions follow the changes in the composition of the rural social sector. The line is no longer at the old vs the new (traditional organisations and those established after the 1989 transformation), which often coincides with another informal division into those receiving more local funding and less (more on that further in the subsection). Rural NGOs are now divided into more and less professional ones. It is the level of professionalisation that distinguishes rural NGOs. Note that 43% of them still use volunteer labour only. They face the problem (not unlike urban NGOs) of a shortage of people who are willing to work for them, even for money.⁴⁸⁵ These jobs are not popular because the salaries are relatively low (average income in the sector is below the remuneration levels in business and does not keep pace with the inflation rate, which even the public sector does).⁴⁸⁶ As one interviewee emphasised, *It is already changing. The attitude that you cannot earn good money in NGOs because it is voluntary work. We are working on making these organisations more professional and turning them into places where people would actually work, even if not full-time. For example, women from rural areas at risk of transport exclusion. They could start working on their economic stability in small organisations like farm wives associations or others* (I1). Professionalisation is manifested in employing personnel (even temporary, be it under employment contracts or civil-law contracts), acquiring funds, especially from public sources, which enforces ‘project logic’, and managing the project according to a specific methodology (such as Project Cycle Management). Another professionalisation indicator is the engagement of volunteers under written volunteer work contracts that set out terms and conditions for both parties.⁴⁸⁷ Professionalised rural (and urban) organisations more often engage in regional or even national activities with project budgets running into millions of zlotys. One interviewee shared her insights on the matter, *Yes, some organisations apply with us and have applied for large grants, but others apply*

484 Zajda, 2022.

485 Charycka / Gumkowska / Arczewska, 2020.

486 Ibidem.

487 Zajda, 2022.

with Pomerania Funds (...) really, their budgets go up to several or over a dozen million zlotys (I1). The professionalisation of rural NGOs: better knowledge, skills, and competencies of leaders and members, as well as increased financial resources, are a must, according to the interviewed local action group leaders. As one of them emphasised, *Life has taught us that you can no longer do anything meaningful with just a briefcase and a business card* (I2). The local action group leaders believed that more resources should enable them to expand into new areas of activity. They seldom try to tackle social problems considered difficult and complex, and requiring a high-budget and long-term commitment. These characteristics describe, for example, the problem of dependency among older people with disabilities. Rural NGOs most often engage in promoting hobbies, recreation, or out-of-school activities for children and youth, which are not resource-intensive.⁴⁸⁸ However, the public expects these organisations to do more for older people. As one interviewee put it, *We are all aware that there won't be enough people to look after the elderly, and it will be a challenge. Anywhere local governments fail, the third sector will have to step in and address the needs of the ageing population* (I8).

Local action groups made diverse efforts to promote the establishment of new NGOs and to encourage informal groups to register associations. They paid for legal advice for NGOs, helped fill out application forms and settle projects, and commissioned various social services from local NGOs. One interviewee shared, *Another thing we managed to do well was to have all contracts awarded to NGOs. All of them, 100%, even though funding terms allow for local governments to apply as well. We decided to do it this way, and all municipalities were on board. This way (...) NGOs can build capital and create their stories* (I3).

Some actions taken by local action groups to strengthen local NGOs were often innovative. A study of a representative sample of Polish local action groups shows that one of the four social innovations they deployed was to reinforce the social competencies potential of local NGO leaders.⁴⁸⁹ Rural NGO leaders are involved in the overwhelming majority of the groups' activities. They decide who the groups partner with, what relationships are fostered, what tangible and intangible support they seek, and where they do it. Therefore, it is the leaders' competencies, skills, and knowledge that drive the local action groups.⁴⁹⁰ Elevating NGO leaders was an important goal for local action groups also because rural NGOs often have problems encouraging members to take over from leaders who wish to resign (due to health issues, for example). People are reluctant to take on a leading role, which petrifies governance. The lack of successors for the

488 Zajda, 2017.

489 Zajda, 2022.

490 Charycka / Gumkowska / Arczewska, 2020.

leadership position is a problem for 48% of rural NGOs.⁴⁹¹ If the leader is suffering from burnout, the very existence of the organisation is at risk. There may be plenty of reasons, from stress caused by unstable income to problems with challenging interactions with the organisation's environment, such as the local authorities and residents. Note that rural NGOs seldom have funds to build internal human resources. Every third organisation makes no effort to improve the knowledge or skills of its members, which is particularly problematic for those with smaller budgets.⁴⁹² In addition, training preferences vary among NGOs. The primary domain is competencies related to acquiring funds. It was declared by 50% of Polish NGOs in 2018. Subsequently, NGOs are interested in such areas as knowledge specific to a given domain, public relations, promotion, media communications, finance, and formal and legal aspects of running NGOs. The least popular topics include cooperation with businesses, human resources management, acquisition and management of new volunteers, paid and business activities, new technologies, relationships with public administration, needs assessment, action monitoring, planning, evaluation, or foreign languages. From the point of view of the interviewed representatives of local action groups, the knowledge, competencies, and skills of members of rural associations and foundations are necessary for effective efforts for local communities, including those aimed at improving rural quality of life. One interviewee shared this regarding barriers to promoting activity in local communities: *People don't know how to write [projects, K.Z.]. This is one of the barriers. That's why we need leaders who can do it. In each village, there are three or four people who can analyse it. They need to be encouraged to become leaders and take over the job of putting information and creative ideas on paper properly* (I5).

Researchers believe that the low level of professionalisation of NGOs is a reason for poor cooperation between the public sector (local governments) and some local organisations. At the same time, this cooperation is particularly valuable for endeavours that require additional resources (not necessarily funds). Good governance is yet to be fully implemented in Poland. Many local government members consider low attendance during village meetings or public consultations a success, assuming it means stability and no conflicts, as they are believed to attract public attention.⁴⁹³ Attitudes of local authorities towards community leaders are yet another matter. Leaders are often perceived as competitors rather than partners in solving local social problems. Therefore, acceptance of good governance principles is conditional for local rural municipal authorities. It comes with a multitude of reservations aimed at preserving the

491 Ibidem.

492 Charycka / Gumkowska, 2019.

493 Zajda, 2022.

local *status quo* of power, which they do not want to see threatened by representatives of NGOs gaining in importance. One interviewee emphasised, *Local governments are scared of it. They fight back and don't want NGOs. It has to be said loud and clear: local authorities do not want strong organisations in rural areas because they can be sources of opponents for the next elections. So they give NGOs something to keep them quiet and satisfied* (I1). This *modus operandi* of local governments can curb the growth of NGOs when the leaders perceive local authorities as their only support, which leads to lack of cooperation with others. As one of them synthesised, *In our area, local governments are still under the influence of misinterpreted self-governance and agency after the sociopolitical transformation. Our mayors of rural municipalities often say, 'No, no. Don't do this. We will do it for you.' This has led to small organisations—especially farm wives associations and volunteer fire brigades, because there were hardly any others at the time—relying on what the mayor gave them. We go to them, report a problem, and the authorities take care of it. Today, we still have this problem that this approach is easier. Just go to the municipal office and ask for money, and the mayor finds a way to support the organisation* (I1). As experts noted, rural NGOs still depend on local government financial support. This homogeneous budget structure persists. This means that despite the two decades in the European Union and substantial monetary transfers, which have led to many changes in the countryside, including for NGOs, there is still room for an independent source of funding for the organisations.⁴⁹⁴

However, the relations between local authorities and NGOs (especially other than farm wives associations and volunteer fire brigades) have changed over the last decade. Voices criticising local governments for awarding contracts to 'the right people' are not as common as they used to be. Not more than a dozen years ago, researchers reported on non-transparent competitive processes leading to awarding grants to preferred associations that pursued ideas that were often run-of-the-mill, unimaginative, and imitative. They noted that if local governments held consultations regarding the competitive processes, they invited selected organisations only, and the official notice of a call for applications could be found on the municipal noticeboard only.⁴⁹⁵ According to the interviewees, it is no longer an issue, also thanks to efforts by NGOs and local action groups. This opinion aptly illustrates the problem: *I think NGOs will be the force that makes local governments more participatory, more open. They can be a tool of social audit* (I1). Local governments' readiness to work with local NGOs (take specific actions to prepare a project/activity and implement it together) could still be improved. Usually, local authorities simply hold competitive procedures to

494 Śpiewak / Goszczyński, 2024.

495 Adamiak / Biejat/Charycka, 2016.

award contracts for social services to associations or foundations and set the framework for how the service should be performed. Alas, they do not form a partnership with NGOs to perform it jointly. Besides, not all NGOs want to work with local governments and their representatives for fear of getting involved in politics.⁴⁹⁶

Relationships between NGOs and the public sector are not the only ones changing. Internal relations within the third sector also evolve. Recent years have seen intensified interactions among NGOs. Researchers believe it is due to the changing perception of the state's role as a supporter of NGOs. Fewer organisations consider the state a driving force of the sector's development.⁴⁹⁷ The higher collaboration potential among local NGOs does not mean the relationships are easy. One interviewee illustrated the problem with her experience, *Sometimes, people think—they don't know, didn't check, didn't ask, but they're certain—that we take care only of our own. I hear it all the time.* (I1).

Traditional NGOs like farm wives associations and voluntary fire brigades are rarely considered 'our own' in the derogatory sense. They have been trusted by the rural public for generations. Despite the sector's evolution, its position remains strong and virtually unassailable. One interviewee shared, *It's about trust. That's right. It's the key: the village has confidence in these organisations. In principle, they are joined by people looking to do something for others. It is the next step in this social relationship and their effort for others through which they realise themselves* (I6). Another leader emphasised that *Firefighters are the leaders in the countryside because everyone respects them. Every firefighter is respected in the village because they save lives, extinguish fires, get the cat down, and dig the trench when the water comes. You have to be on good terms with them. Whenever there is a grant to acquire for heritage preservation, the first thing is the uniforms, heritage preservation, and this is what we do. We buy equipment for volunteer fire brigades so they can have insulated food containers and so on, because they sometimes cook, have a bonfire, bring hot dogs, and simply hang out with people. The second in line [to receive support, KZ] are farm wives associations* (I7). 'New' organisations are also increasingly appreciated among rural populations as they are more present in areas important for the communities, such as educating children or youth and senior clubs. In the words of one interviewee, *Considering the last 20 years, (...) rural NGOs have become much more than just farm wives associations and volunteer fire brigades. Sometimes they professionally address social problems, run self-help homes or rehabilitation centres* (I5).

The formalisation of rural associations does not replace informal activities, mainly among neighbours. Analyses in Chapter III show that the Polish rural

496 Zajda, 2022.

497 Charycka / Gumkowska, 2019.

population is not lonely. They receive help from neighbours with whom most residents are on good terms. The good relationships are evidenced by the fact that the vast majority of rural communities greet their neighbours and talk to them. A significant majority do small favours such as lending things or house-sitting. Nearly half of them have very good relationships with neighbours because they visit each other on special occasions. Neighbourhood remains an important rural institution. As reported in the literature, the countryside differs from the city in that people know not only their next-door neighbour but also others, sometimes even everyone in the village. This makes virtually everyone a neighbour of everyone.⁴⁹⁸ Neighbourly assistance remains part of the rural axionormative system. One of the interviewees had this to say on the topic: *I think we've managed to preserve a non-egoistic mindset in the village because we've been living here for years and know each other very well. Perhaps the good old times of 'All Friends Here'⁴⁹⁹ are gone, but I think we have a lot of empathy and readiness to help. For example, if I know my neighbour is unable to do something, I go there myself and offer to do the shopping or help in some other way. I think it is a great advantage of the countryside compared to the city. We are not anonymous and know each other. If someone needs something, people or institutions like the Municipal Welfare Centre will help* (I4). Rural residents consider themselves ready to help not only in critical moments. It is unthinkable that someone could refuse to help in an emergency. As one interviewee emphasised, *It is particularly visible when someone in the municipality is hit by something terrible. The neighbourly solidarity is great at moments like this. People help and join the effort, but also participate in social life* (I1).

Informal activities in the countryside are supported by parishes, which remain highly relevant to the rural setting despite secularisation and new morals. They are a source of information, particularly for older residents. Announcements are made at the end of each Mass, especially on Sundays. These may concern support campaigns or activities of local organisations, such as NGOs, dedicated to the residents. This is how one of the interviewees describes parish activities: *Yes, such spontaneous or occasional actions take place at churches. They are initiated by the priest. A local priest can really bring people together and build informal groups if he is revered and respected, if there are no deviant behaviours* (I5). As community leaders, priests can encourage neighbourly assistance and activity for the parish and the entire municipality. They help alleviate some social issues, most often linked to poverty among young people, large families, or older people. Polish rural communities engage in Christmas activities. Parishes put up Christmas

498 Głowacki, 2024.

499 It is a popular Polish film from the 1960s depicting neighbourly relationships in the countryside.

trees with decorations containing children's names and their dream presents. Such projects help children from impoverished families, whose parents or guardians could not afford presents. Furthermore, parishes hold various events for older people, such as trips, support groups, or campaigns promoting healthy lifestyles, especially among women. Parishes were also active during the COVID-19 pandemic, providing material and spiritual support and mitigating the effects of social isolation.⁵⁰⁰

4.3 The future of the countryside in the context of the quality of life of its residents

The resources available to the countryside and its residents will change. The changes could be difficult to imagine today, especially in the long term. On a slightly shorter time horizon, e. g. a decade, one could ponder the future of the Polish countryside for two groups of residents highly relevant to demographic transitions: young and old rural populations. Rural quality of life will affect who remains in the countryside by choice and who is forced to stay, whether young people live in peripheral villages or consider them only a temporary place of living until they can leave for a city to seek education or non-agricultural work.

The interviewed local action group leaders believe young people will gladly live in suburban villages. Conversely, they will not return to a remote village before a specific point in life when their financial situation is stable and they have children whom they would like to raise in the countryside. As one of them synthesised, *As I said before, a young man who leaves for college anywhere has to spend some time there to finally see and appreciate what they left behind. If they find a nice vision to change the place, they'll be back. They'll come back, live here, and find a way to make it happen. Even when the parents urge them 'Stay there, start a life there. How will you make a living here?' That's it. What's here for them? The exact thing we were talking about. People who have already made a life can come here to raise children, send them out into the world, and run a business here (I7).*

Experts expect population concentration around central places and depopulation of peripheral areas in two decades. The overall rural population will remain roughly the same, but the age structure will deteriorate (a significant increase in older age categories), and the educational structure will improve.⁵⁰¹ Desagrarisation will deepen, and the dominant segment of the labour structure will be blue-collar workers, reaching about 60%, with the middle class amounting

500 Sułkowski / Ignatowski, 2020.

501 Halamska / Kłodziński / Stanny, 2023.

to around 30% of the rural population.⁵⁰² Rural residents will be interested in non-agricultural activities. The share of farming households will continue to decline. It is expected to drop down to 5–6% in 2044. The number of individual agricultural holdings will also fall (there will be about 900 thousand farms in rural areas in 2044).⁵⁰³ The rural economy will expand in the area of traditional activities, like agriculture, small-scale production, tourism, and recreation. Renewable energy, ecological services, and infrastructure (water supply, wastewater treatment, waste management) will become more critical, as will the role of freelancers. Family farms will continue to dominate, with auxiliary/additional (quasi-market, subsistence, hobby) farms being the most numerous. The largest group among individual holdings will be auxiliary farms (about 69%).⁵⁰⁴

The countryside will need more services. As one interviewee put it, The countryside will be founded on services. Be it recreation for people who come to relax or services for the local population. I think we will develop as rural areas, not strictly agricultural areas (I1). The services will include senior and disability care, but the interviewees do not believe there will be many people willing to provide them. The reasons include the significant funds necessary to run such services, combined with certain inclinations related to human and social capital. One interviewee emphasised, When it comes to social services, such as care farms, they will be provided, but not common. I wouldn't be overly optimistic about it. It won't be a call to arms because these services require special infrastructure and special skills and approaches. Not everyone has been made to work with children, particularly children with special needs or even with older people. Farmers might decide not to do it (I1). Adult children more and more often do not provide care for their ageing parents for a variety of reasons. All this makes facilities, such as care homes, day care centres (retirement homes), nursing homes, etc., necessary.⁵⁰⁵ Although social services for children, such as spare time activities, will grow, the need for investments in senior services is emphasised. As one interviewee indicated, This is the future. There will be plenty of Social Service Centres (...). There are also community care centres where people who can't cope on their own, are lonely or suffer from some mental or physical discomfort can function (I5).

The service profile will also address transport exclusion, a growing problem in peripheral areas. Depopulation will lead to many institutions like schools, libraries, and grocery stores being shut down. The new services will be mobile. These could be coordinated doctor visits, stores on wheels, or demand-respon-

502 Halamska, 2023, p. 47.

503 Zegar, 2024, p. 178.

504 Zegar, 2024, p. 177.

505 Zegar, 2024.

sive local transport.⁵⁰⁶ Digitalisation and online business (such as selling local products) will create new opportunities for local labour markets. Still, artificial intelligence may reduce vacancies. Some interviewees pointed out that local entrepreneurs who seek business funding from local action groups are interested in deploying AI-based systems to reduce workforce costs. The digital technology boom will not cause all services to go online. Virtual administration, or even education and culture to some extent, will be available and desired, but some services will still require direct human contact. The care services necessary in the countryside will fall into that category.⁵⁰⁷

The interviewees believe the future of the countryside hinges on its social capital. Changes in the mechanism of building rural social capital resources are affected by improved living standards, including the accessibility of soft infrastructure, like spaces for people to meet and integrate and the development of social services in the countryside. It is no longer founded on deficits that force people to cooperate. The cooperation tends to be based on a conscious choice, not driven by reciprocal, clear-cut neighbour obligations. They were deeply rooted in the axionormative system of the traditional village. Cooperation was an existential matter for the community during harvest, for example. Today, social engagement is voluntary. One interviewee emphasised, *Back in my days, when I was the head of the village, young people found entertainment in events on the sports field, like the harvest festival or Children's Day. It was a different idea of spending time together, but it had to be done here, and it was easier to get people to help by just saying, 'we're doing this and that.' Before the event, we used to do community service because it worked very well. Today, community service is not as necessary because we have the infrastructure, roads, water, playgrounds, and outdoor gyms (I6).*

The NGO sector will grow and become more professional. Its relationships with the local government will change as the latter will eventually consider NGOs the best allies in the fight against demographic challenges, including care for dependent persons. One interviewee shared, *I think local government awareness in this regard is growing. It is their burden, shared with NGOs, to provide and ensure day care centres. It is the perfect daytime solution for our area. The business also recognises the need, and we have commercial senior homes in our village. Most of us are aware, I think, and this is where we're going (I8).* Apart from the professionalisation of NGOs, the challenges include their activity in peripheral areas. Those bereft of human capital will also often suffer from social

506 Halamska, 2023.

507 Kalinowski, 2023, p. 90.

capital deficits.⁵⁰⁸ Traditional organisations will remain crucial for the Polish countryside. Neighbourly assistance will not disappear either.

The rural quality of life will depend on social capital resources. As one interviewee put it, It is a very good place to live for young and old. All we need is for them to feel like they belong to the community. It is a real effort for the rural community to get people to stick together like they used to, to show up for each other, to see each other's problems, while keeping a respectful distance. (16). Social capital resources are considered indispensable for the resilience of the countryside to various crises, of which the future holds plenty. As noted by Urszula Budzich-Tabor (an activist of the Forum for the Activation of Rural Areas, one of the key Polish integrators of rural development organisations), the countryside has to expand its social capital resources, including social trust and support networks, also together with external actors, to be able to successfully face such challenges as climate change, demographic issues, and energy crises. It calls for changes in the value system, mainly concerning the natural environment and treating the countryside as a common good for the residents and the entire society.⁵⁰⁹

In summary, the changes occurring in the Polish countryside today should be perceived in the context of the country's history. Echoes of the past reverberate through the present into the future, making desired transformations feasible in a longer or shorter term. Sometimes, the awareness of *longue durée* processes instils doubt whether meaningful social changes can be implemented in a dozen years or even a few decades, especially regarding norms and values.

The living standards in the Polish countryside have changed significantly over the last decades, partially thanks to the accession to the European Union. Although the countryside is diversified, infrastructure has improved everywhere. Better infrastructure helps expand various social services. Demography is and will continue to be the test of whether infrastructure projects have been successful. Still, its primary impact will be to urge the deepening of local deliberation and communication between communities and local authorities. Rural resilience and potential for such development mechanisms, such as the smart village, will depend largely on the residents' social capital resources. There will be no shortage of challenges for the Polish countryside in the coming years. Some of them will concern population ageing. Planned future infrastructural projects will be evaluated in terms of their economic efficiency. The village of the future will enjoy mobile services adapted to the personal needs of its residents, new communication tools, and artificial intelligence in the service of education, culture, labour markets, and health care. Today, rural residents are anxious about the

508 Kalinowski, 2023.

509 Budzich-Tabor, 2023, p. 20.

adverse impact of AI on social ties, especially among the young generation. How new technologies will be used, for whose benefit, and to what end will depend mainly on the education provided for all generations. Education will decide whether the technology has a detrimental or beneficial impact on local communities. Whether it will degrade the potential to cooperate based on social trust and shared norms and values, or support social capital resources instead. The future of the countryside lies in professionalised NGOs and any other forms of associations that allow the community to respond to diverse crises actively.

Summary

The monograph aimed to explore the quality of life in the Polish countryside, considering the social capital resources of the rural population. The analysis has been embedded in the perspective of transitions in rural areas and their drivers. The changes were discussed in the context of highly relevant historical events, such as the introduction of *corvée* and the Partitions, the enfranchisement of peasants, and the restoration of independence in 1918, practically lost again for the duration of the Polish People's Republic. The fall of communism in 1989 and Poland's accession to the European Union opened up new avenues for the development of the Polish countryside, which has been affected by the processes of restratification and disagrarisation also observed in other European countries.

Rural quality of life is the focal point of the monograph because the authors believe it is decisive for the future of the countryside through its impact on such issues as migration. They linked quality of life to social capital resources, assuming that interpersonal relationships form the foundation for cooperation, and behavioural patterns based on social norms and values affect social bonding, including ties based on the territory. The strength of social ties simultaneously reflects and shapes social capital resources. Informal and formal cooperation based on social trust and internalised norms and values can empower rural communities to embrace the dynamic socioeconomic situation.

The survey offers the following conclusions on the quality of life in the Polish countryside. Rural residents are:

- mostly attached to their place of living and intending to stay there. The attachment is especially strong in residents of villages located more than 20 kilometres from urban areas and among those experiencing financial hardship. Most residents of the Polish countryside are satisfied with living in their village. This group comprises mainly young and middle-aged people (18 to 44 years). In terms of employment, most of those satisfied are retired or homemakers.
- satisfied with their home amenities (public water system, central heating, and domestic hot water). Over 90% have an LCD/plasma television set, a computer,

and Internet access (nearly 60% use fibre optic). More than one-third of the houses have outdoor CCTV and photovoltaic systems, but only half of the population have access to a public natural gas network.

- satisfied with the state of the natural environment, cleanliness, and security in their place of living.
- welcoming to new houses and estates as well as agricultural activities in their village, but sceptical towards new industrial facilities and immigrants.
- positively disposed towards business activity, mainly in handicrafts, culinary arts, and agritourism, but more often merely as passive witnesses of their neighbour's engagement in these efforts. Most rural residents do not see any potential for non-agricultural activity for themselves, such as rural tourism, promotion of handicrafts or regional foods, care farms, learning farmsteads, or agritourism. More than half of the rural population consider agriculture significant for rural development. Land development is seen as an opportunity by a slightly smaller portion. According to a quarter of the respondents, new industrial projects could stimulate the countryside.
- rather satisfied with access to medical services, including pharmacies (every fourth rural resident notices the problem of pharmacy inaccessibility).
- rather satisfied with the quality of care services for older people and cultural opportunities for the general public. Every fifth resident is dissatisfied with it. Although they recognise the deficit in care services for older people, only one in twenty expressed interest in running a care farm.
- rather satisfied with transport services, sports and educational services for older people.
- optimistic about care services for children and out-of-school sports and education services for children and young people.

Furthermore, the survey identified the social capital resources available and unavailable to the Polish countryside. Rural residents:

- place the highest level of trust in their immediate family, extended family, neighbours, and colleagues when it comes to interpersonal relationships.
- trust local (municipal) administration, European Union, courts of law, and local authorities the most among all institutions. The Roman Catholic Church and other Churches are also considered trustworthy.
- treasure primarily such values as integrity, health, security, freedom, and a peaceful life. Slightly lower but still considerable acceptance was found for values related to friends, work, having children, respect from others, and marriage. The relatively lowest appreciation was expressed for education, money, faith/religion, and an adventurous life.

- rarely indicate faith and religion as central to their lives, even though 92.2% declared themselves believers. About 30% of the rural population are lapsed or only occasionally practising believers.
- do not feel lonely and have friends. Most of them can count on support from their family, friends, and acquaintances when it comes to finances, family and household problems, equipment, tools, and emotional support.
- have frequent contact with their immediate families (every day or several times a week).
- stay on good terms with neighbours: meet them for celebrations, talk to them, and exchange favours. Other, more sporadic, contacts involve the extended family, the head of the village, councillors, and priests.
- engage socially mainly in material and financial aid to those in need (almost all respondents declared such support). Intangible aid was reported slightly less often (declared by 77% of the respondents). Rural residents engage in local associations even less (28% of the population).
- are involved in hobby online groups if they belong to virtual communities at all (one-third of them do). The qualitative part of the study offers an account of changes in various domains of rural quality of life in the context of their usefulness and compatibility with the actual needs of the rural community, focusing on young and older age groups.

The interviewees drew attention to the need for such infrastructural projects as:

- expansion of transport infrastructure and improvement of transport accessibility, particularly for older residents and youth who attend school outside their place of living.
- provision of soft infrastructure to address the needs of rural youth regarding leisure activities, social bonding in the place of living, and a sense of territorial belonging.

Furthermore, the interviews revealed the significance of the following investments for rural communities:

- infrastructural projects to enhance local social capital resources, such as village halls.
- rural digital projects, particularly access to broadband Internet, which reportedly determines the growth of high-tech rural social services, expansion of the labour market (especially for young residents), and attractiveness to urban immigrants.
- projects for human, financial, and social capital in rural NGOs. Improving professionalisation and forging authentic partnerships with local authorities are considered opportunities for NGOs to become part of the deinstitutionalisation process of rural social services.

The interviewed rural community leaders believe the future of the Polish countryside hinges on such factors as willingness among young people to move there, start families, and engage in economic and social activities in the countryside. However, they are expected to demonstrate a preference for periurban villages. Conversely, they will not return to a remote village before a specific point in life when their financial situation is stable and they have children whom they would like to raise in the countryside, as long as social services are available. The latter should be expanded with cultural, educational, and recreational opportunities.

Rural communities will age. Peripheral and marginalised areas where the vicious circle of underdevelopment has already gained considerable momentum will suffer from depopulation. These are areas far from the city. Their hard and soft infrastructure levels are substandard and they struggle to attract investors and young age groups. Living in the countryside will be a matter of choice rather than necessity. The rural standards of living, social capital, social networks, the axionormative system, and the level of social trust will affect decisions to live in the countryside. The nature of the capital will shift towards bridging capital. The process will be slow, considering the historically motivated culture of distrust ingrained in the collective memory of Poles (especially among older residents). The countryside will accept new residents, and the natives will have to deal with the ensuing 'otherness' also in terms of lifestyle. Will faith and religion remain important values in the rural community? Will they aid and support social ties? The evidence suggests not. Practice diverges from the declarations concerning the significance of faith and religion. Social ties will change. Territorial bonds will no longer be founded on being born in a particular place. The changes in rural social capital will determine the countryside's resilience. In this context, investments in social capital, emphasised by the rural community leaders, are just as important as digital village projects.

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