

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MORAVIAN COUNTRYSIDE

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Abstract

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This paper deals with problems of the contemporary Moravian countryside. It discusses the definition and perceptions of the countryside, its functions, current development trend, general characteristics and differentiation. Multifunctional development of the countryside is stressed. Problems of peripheral countryside are considered to be the most serious, and small towns in these areas play an extremely important role. The sustainability of some communes with less than 200 inhabitants seems to be endangered most. The future importance of the countryside is seen in it being an alternative to the urban way of life, in the maintenance and cultivation of the landscape and in preserving local and regional traditions in the era of globalization. The human factor is of great importance. Main research sights are indicated.

Key words

countryside, rural development, Moravia, Czech Republic

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1. Introduction

Until now, the countryside has stood in the shadow of the study of urban systems. Activity, population, innovation and progress are concentrated in cities. The countryside ensures mainly food, and more recently, some recreational opportunities. The countryside's demographic surplus during the era of the first demographic transition enabled the development of industrialization and urbanization. The current era, however, has brought significant changes.

Although cities are still the bearers of progress, current urbanization processes are heading towards population decreases in large and medium cities. Even in Czech Republic, a tendency toward counter-urbanization has begun to appear, which means a shift in the population from cities to rural areas. As opposed to during the preceding several decades, the ratio of rural population to the total population of Czech Republic is increasing, even in many peripheral regions.

A second important factor that has turned attention to the question of the countryside is the fact that the countryside has stopped being a mere base for agricultural production. It is just the opposite, as industrialized agriculture here has decreased to the benefit of the multifunctional development of rural space. Agriculture itself has ever greater significance more for landscape maintenance than for food production. This means that the countryside needs to be studied as a relatively complex whole. In the past, the countryside was a relatively isolated area, where innovation came slowly. Today, however, modern trends reach the countryside very quickly thanks to intense globalization processes. The aim of this paper is to discuss several aspects of the current countryside with the example of Moravia - one of the Czech historical lands. This paper was elaborated within the 7th FP project "Developing Europe's Rural regions in the Era of Globalization", financed by the European Union.

2. Definition and characteristics of the countryside

The definition of the countryside is above all connected to the question of its separateness from the city. This definition has historically evolved. Today, together with sprawling urban organisms, cities are freely expanding into the surrounding landscape. Halfacree (1993) divides definitions of the countryside into two groups. The first group attempts to characterize a corresponding type of rural area. The second group is based in the socio-cultural conception of structures of knowledge, which we use as rules and sources with the goal of giving sense to daily life. It seems that such a non-material definition may dominate over the alternative, based on location, in the post-modern era.

As opposed to cities, which represent points in the settlement system using a certain scale, the classically perceived countryside has regional scope. Experience has shown that small towns are integral parts of the countryside, as they are their centers. In peripheral areas in particular, small towns play an irreplaceable role in ensuring employment opportunities, services, social contacts, transport, etc. for the surrounding small settlements.

It seems that the main differences need to be searched for in the ways of life and in factors arising out of the smaller size of rural municipalities, which form several aspects of the inhabitants' environment. The level of societal control in the

countryside is considerably higher when compared to cities. Among other things, one important characteristic arises from this, a characteristic whose importance in the future will undoubtedly rise: Personal safety is higher in the countryside. However, the rural idyll (Cloke et al. 2003) is still being shifted into the background. This is related to quality of life in the countryside (e.g. Giarchi 2007).

The general perception of the countryside by society has fundamentally changed. Juska (2007) shows with Lithuania as an example how observing the countryside has changed over almost 15 years. In the 1990s, the Lithuanian countryside was stigmatized as a backward area, incapable of accepting changes and a place where the socialist mentality continued to exist. In the next decade, however, the countryside was already viewed as a healthy and attractive environment, under the influence of growing compatibility with the European Union with its suburbanization and counter-urbanization trends. It was and is similar elsewhere in Europe, but perhaps over a different timeline.

One of the basic studies on rural geography (Woods 2004) analyzes the definition of the countryside over 16 pages without the author coming to a definite conclusion. Nonetheless, this underlines the fact that rural research is a very necessary and topical affair.

3. Current development trends of the Czech (Moravian) countryside

Tab. 1 (Note: Moravia is neither an administrative nor a statistical unit. That is why we use the national data to describe general trends) shows the percentage of the population in each municipality size category since 1960. Looking at the table, it is apparent that extensive urbanization took place in the period 1960 - 1990, during which the percentage of the population in rural municipalities markedly decreased. It is interesting that small towns maintained a more or less constant percentage of around 30%, whereas the populations of medium and large cities grew. After 1990, we see the opposite trend: the percentage of the population living in municipalities with a population of up to 2000 grew, whereas the percentage of the population in medium and large cities decreased.

Tab. 1: The percentage of the population in each municipality size category.

Year	Up to 1,999	2,000 – 19,999	20,000 – 99,999	100,000 and more
1960	41.2	27.6	13.5	17.7
1970	34.8	30.0	16.4	18.7
1980	29.3	30.8	20.0	20.0
1990	21.1	30.7	22.8	25.4
2000	25.6	29.1	24.3	21.0
2007	26.3	29.7	23.3	20.7

Source: Calculation based on data from the Czech Statistical Office, Prague.

Between the censuses in 1991 and 2001, the number of inhabitants of municipalities with less than 2,000 inhabitants grew by 116,000, whereas the total population decreased. The ratio of the population in these municipalities to the population of Czechia grew by 0.8%. Despite the influence of administrative changes, there is no doubt that the countryside makes up an important part of Czech settlements.

It is necessary to mention that statistical growth does not always completely correspond to reality. Many young people in particular, who spend most of their time in cities either studying or as young professionals, remain registered in their home villages. The problem is the circumstance that the factual content of the term "permanent address" is changing, as this is detrimental to statistics. Young professionals often take some time to become stable and put off establishing a family and getting a true permanent address for a later date. Thus, their permanent addresses are nowhere else but in the place where they come from, although they spend a minimal amount of time there.

In the past, migration as a rule meant an improvement in the age structure of the population, because most people moved for work or to follow a partner when they became economically active. It appears; however, that today's model of moving to the countryside may be different. Often, after people have finished being economically active, they leave their urban apartments to the upcoming generation and retire permanently to the countryside to houses inherited from their parents. This type of migration, however, worsens the age structure of the rural population and may bring problems related to aging.

Another problem may be the qualification structure of the rural population. The countryside today is on the same level as the city in almost everything, except for cultural institutions in a broad sense. Thus, more educated people who want qualified work, a cultural life, and rich social contacts leave their rural home. This makes the qualification structure of the rural population worse. As a consequence, the general cultural level of the countryside is lowered in comparison with the city, but there is also a lack of suitable people for organizing village life. As a final consequence, these rural municipalities needing the most help cannot get it, as richer municipalities with more qualified populations are often more successful in gaining public contracts.

4. The function of the Czech (Moravian) countryside

As has already been indicated, agriculture, as a food-producing sector, has stopped being the dominant function of the countryside in regards to employment, the economy and way of life of the population. The percentage of those employed in agriculture decreased between the 1991 and 2001 censuses from 11.6% to 4.4% and today reaches 3.6%. The production of all main crops (with the exception of oil seeds) and all major types of livestock production are also in long-term decline.

The current role of Czech agriculture is maintaining a certain level of employment and landscape maintenance. Perhaps in the future it may be possible to speak about agriculture's contribution to ensuring the energy security of the state, but this goal still requires many legislative measures and economic changes. Moreover, it is currently a very controversial affair. Forestry has greater prospects in the primary sector, as in many areas it is a significantly more lucrative sector for municipalities and businessmen than agriculture. Despite this, most of the literature deals with the agricultural aspects of rural development, or at least in the Central Europe region. The studies by Věžník (2002), Bičík and Jančák (2005) and Baňski (2007) can be named, for example.

The function of the countryside for the development of recreation and tourism is frequently discussed. The majority of tourism is directed at large cities, mountains,

spas and reservoirs. The countryside provides second homes to the urban population in particular. Cottagers have saved, in large part, the rural housing stock, which would have deteriorated without them. The coexistence of the local inhabitants and cottagers is a fundamental question. If they find common ground between them, then cottagers with their qualifications and contacts can be very beneficial for rural communities.

Considering the lack of capital in the countryside, the owners of many sites of agro-tourist equipment are urban dwellers or foreigners, who as a rule do not have a relationship with specific rural communities. On the other hand, rural dwellers are not always inclined to the development of such activities. It is necessary to realize that the aging rural population is interested in a quiet and conservative way of life, whereas their financial security is not connected with local activity, as this comes from state social resources.

In rural areas, we often find manufacturing plants of an industrial character that have been pushed out of cities. Whereas plants focused on processing agricultural production often follow the fate of agricultural enterprises, wood processing is more successful. Sometimes, these are the remnants of the "associated production" of collective farms; in other cases, they are new businesses located in the countryside due to lower property prices and a better bargaining position with municipal offices. Some manufacturing-type services that have large requirements for space and do not require frequent customer visits (hardware and furniture stores, used car dealerships, etc.) may behave similarly.

The sector of social services develops in correspondence with the demographic development of the state and countryside. Thus, schools are gradually disappearing from rural municipalities. For rural communities, the loss of schools also marks the end of the last cultural and educational institution in general, and with this, the irreversible cultural downfall of the community. On the other hand, the demand for social infrastructure is growing; including elderly housing, medical treatment centres for those with long-term illnesses and general senior services. The quiet environment of rural areas offers suitable conditions for the location of such facilities.

Housing is still an important function of the countryside. It is sought after by various groups of the population. In the hinterlands of large and medium cities, these are well-off families of productive age. Another group includes people who purposefully seek out homes in the countryside in order to change their lifestyle. Again another large group of people interested in living in the countryside are senior citizens after they have stopped being economically active.

The countryside is gradually catching up to the city in assuring technical infrastructure. However, in this context, it is necessary to solve the issue of the economic efficiency of building standard technical networks in micro regions with very small villages in hilly areas or where settlements are dispersed. Even small amounts of solid, liquid or gaseous waste may have very negative effects on the environment due to current packaging technology, the use of household chemicals, etc. Therefore, it would be suitable to find and introduce new technology for reducing the amount of and liquidating waste from very small communities.

Of course, alongside rural settlements, the rural landscape is changing as well (Palang et al. 2004). The practical culmination of this approach is the concept of

permaculture (Holmgren 2002).

5. The differentiation of the Moravian countryside

The current Moravian countryside can be broken up into three basic types. The countryside in the hinterlands of large and medium cities is a suburbanizing area. In many cases, the boundaries between cities and rural settlements have been washed away. This may lead to the loss of identity of small towns and villages in the hinterland of large and medium cities. The coexistence of the newly arrived population, who are above all involved in activities in the city, and the original rural population with its different demographic and social structure is often a problem.

The motives of individual actors involved in suburbanization are not without interest. Is it really all about leaving the polluted city behind and getting closer to nature, or is it, rather, an attempt to get private property in a safer area in a relatively simple way? On the other hand, there are some cases where a certain disappointment has begun to appear. Not all expectations have been met. People spend most of their free time travelling to and from the city, and inside their home. There is no time, nor motivation, to take advantage of the nearby natural surroundings, and contact with neighbours is missing. Moreover, transportation is ever more expensive, and its accompanying phenomena make the environment worse. This disappointment certainly does not dominate, but it will be necessary to take it into account in the future.

The easily accessible countryside of Moravian valleys is characterized by relatively large rural settlements. These settlements have their own local markets, ensuring the existence of basic services, and often have their own economic base as well. Because they are easily accessible, their population can quite simply deal with its requirements for employment opportunities, services and social contacts in larger towns, while they often have several alternatives to choose from. On the other hand, sometimes, thanks to their advantageous accessibility, activities forced out of cities are located here.

A current peculiarity of this type of countryside as regards settlement structure development is the gradual surpassing of micro regionalization. Small towns in these regions face competition both in neighbouring towns and large rural settlements, and in large hypermarkets and other activities in farther away, but still comfortably accessible, large and medium cities. Therefore, for their development, the division of labour is more relevant than central function in regards to the hinterlands.

The peripheral countryside is located in the border regions and inland mountains. Small rural settlements with limited local markets and without basic facilities make up the typical settlement structure here. No substantial investments are aimed at these regions, which results in higher unemployment as a rule. On the other hand, the landscape of these areas (which is in many cases the object of large-scale protection) offers potential for development of the tourism industry, which, however, is often limited by lack of investment funds and a poor infrastructure.

Small towns, as the centres of peripheral regions, are poor centres, but as a result of the lack of competition from larger, more easily accessible centres, are often unequivocally the centres of their rural surroundings, which, as a result of the lack

of social infrastructure facilities, must fulfil the needs of their population in these small towns. Therefore, in peripheral regions, small towns are the key to sustainability of rural settlements.

Because a part of the peripheral countryside is situated on the state border, the question of possible cooperation with foreign partners arises. In other words, this is a question of whether mutual cross-border cooperation could help overcome domestic marginality or not. Unfortunately, Moravia neighbours with such regions of neighbouring states that, so far, do not form the background for economic development on the basis of cooperation.

6. The Moravian countryside's prospects

It is necessary to realize that Moravia is, to a certain extent, a rural country. Measured by the criteria of the industrial age, this would indicate that it is a less progressive land. Today, however, industrial development as a whole no longer represents the main measure of progressiveness. It is measured by education, research and culture - thus quaternary activities. These activities are concentrated in a few selected centres. We have shown, however, that almost the only area in which the countryside hitherto lags behind cities is cultural infrastructure. In this regard, the countryside is still less progressive than cities.

What has changed is the relationship between the city and the countryside. The Czech population is no longer separated into urban and rural. Urban activities have expanded to the countryside; thanks to increasing mobility they are accessible to an ever-larger group of the rural population. Urban inhabitants take advantage of the countryside for their free time activities. The city and countryside are no longer opposites, but are becoming more and more parts of a unified space. In this sense, the conception of the backwardness of rural life dies away.

We have shown that the countryside has several important functions. It offers an alternative to the urban way of life, either for permanent living or for spending free time. Another function of the countryside is the maintenance and cultivation of the landscape. In the era of globalization, the Moravian countryside contributes to preserving local and regional traditions. Thus, within the unified urbanized system, the countryside supplements the cities in many important functions and its preservation is extremely desirable.

This opens up the question of quality of life in the countryside. Quality of life can be evaluated based on "objective" indicators or hard data, with the assistance of which, individual physical, economic and social aspects can be compared, and through the assistance of "subjective" opinions, which can be evaluated based on using sociological methods. Quality of life, although its evaluation is markedly problematic, is the key to understanding the living preference of the population who choose the alternative of life in the countryside.

Of course, the risk of some very small rural settlements gradually dying out exists. However, this does not appear to be a mass phenomenon. Instead, it is more a reduction of the current still surviving services in these communities and their transformation into conglomerates of purely residential buildings gradually turning into cottages. This will of course depend not only on objective bases but also on human factors. People capable of supporting the sustainability of their communities

are, on this level, one of the determining factors.

7. State administration and self-governance in the countryside

After 1990, many small communities pulled away from the municipalities with which they were integrated in the 1970s and 1980s. This fact is understandable, but it is an anachronism. The reform of the state administration that took place in several stages after 1990 was not too successful and was attributed more to political pressure and interests than to the criterion of effective territorial administration. European self-governance and state administration lead mainly to integration. It is apparent that very small municipalities have problems with ensuring the basic aspects of daily life and administration.

The problem of state administration has been dealt with by creating a network of offices with extended competence and authorized municipal offices, whose job is to ensure the functions of state administration on a professional level for which small municipalities are not equipped. State administrative districts created in this way are incorrectly labelled small districts, even though there is not a relationship of superiority and inferiority between municipalities and authorized offices. On the other hand, this could be the first step to future integration, which this time should happen on the basis of democratic methods.

The problem of self-governance has been dealt with by combining municipalities into associations. These associations are created either for a specific aim or for general cooperation, and have differing legal statuses. Several specific groups have gradually developed, such as the Euro regions or LEADER+ local action group regions. Thus, a relatively rich mosaic of regional associations, built on a voluntary basis, is drawn out. A problem, of course, is the voluntary nature of these associations, whose activities rely on voluntary work, which is dying out, possibly meaning the associations' demise, fracturing or as is most often the case, passing into passivity.

8. Conclusions: main research sights connected to rural development

An important task for starting up rural development as a field of research is creating a theory of rural development. It seems that there are a great number of smaller works and studies, but more comprehensive works do not exist in Czech literature. For this reason, it is necessary to define the subject and study methods in the field, and to introduce the main theses and hypotheses. This step is dependent both on the definition of the countryside and also on the disciplines that will be involved in the research. It is clear that the change in orientation from agriculture to countryside has brought a fundamental difference in the theoretical-methodological approach, as agriculture is the problem of a specific field, and the countryside is a wider interdisciplinary affair.

If, as a starting point, we use the definitions emphasizing location, territory and region, the basic theoretical postulates and methodological approaches will be based in geography, which is capable of understanding the countryside in a regional context. Besides rural geography, disciplines working with the landscape are applicable in this approach (landscape ecology, landscape architecture, landscape planning). When perceiving the countryside as a way of life is preferred, sociology in particular is used. Demography and disciplines dealing with gender issues are

related. In these regards, indispensable disciplines are those that deal with economic and technological questions of sectors and activities at work in the countryside, i.e. agriculture, tourism, services, housing, etc.

A wide palette of rural research methods will arise from these disciplines. Quantitative, qualitative and field methods should mutually complement each other: while the first grouping of approaches will be based more on the empirical analysis of tangible aspects, the second group will certainly emphasize qualitative and biographical approaches.

However, to overcome the point of view and tendencies of these fields, which lead to specialization in each discipline over and over again, will require significant effort. The new and otherwise successful economic and social geography textbook by Toušek, Kunc and Vystoupil (2008) analyzes agriculture in 33 pages, whereas the countryside is mentioned in four lines. A relatively expansive anthropogeography textbook (Heineberg 2004) dedicates a large part not just to agriculture, but also to rural areas, but this takes place in two different chapters that are not connected to each other. Moreover, rural settlements are conceived as almost a pure analysis and typology of rural settlements. A collective work edited by Cloke, Marsden and Money (2006) and anthologies edited by Plut (2006) and Surd and Zotić (2007) attempt to draw attention to the multifunctional of rural questions.

The study of the transformation of the post-socialist countryside represents a special chapter (e.g. Buchhofer and Quaisser 1998; Baumann 2008; and many others). The question ponders to what extent the Moravian countryside is still post-socialist, discussing whether it is already post-industrial and globalize. Considering the fact that the countryside, as opposed to cities, better reflects regional, natural, as well as historical and ethnographic conditions and peculiarities is still a legitimate question.

If we were to look for the main differences between the city and the countryside in the social sphere, we would need to turn to sociological studies. Important questions are where the countryside is headed, in what direction it should develop and what instruments could be available to influence this development. Moseley (2003), and from a somewhat different perspective Tapiador (2008), offer more practical publications.

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Summary

The ratio of the rural population of Czechia reached 26% in 2001. Between the censuses in 1991 and 2001, the number of inhabitants of municipalities with less than 2,000 inhabitants grew by 116,000, whereas the total population decreased. The ratio of the population in these municipalities to the population of Czech grew by 0.8%. The countryside has stopped being a mere base for agricultural production. Changes in the rural space occur under influence of globalization, which brings unified modes of production and consumption directed from a few world centres.

The definition of the countryside is based on its separateness from the city. But current cities are expanding into the surrounding space. Today, both rural and urban inhabitants are mostly employed in services. Urban-type villas have penetrated in the countryside. The main differences need to be sought out in the ways of life and the factors arising from the smaller size of rural municipalities. Thus, some definitions are based in the socio-cultural conception. It seems that such a non-material definition may dominate in the post-modern era. The countryside today is on the same level as the city in almost everything, except for cultural institutions. Thus, more educated people who want qualified work, a cultural life, and rich social contacts leave their rural homes. This makes the qualification structure of the rural population worse. Other people who purposefully seek out homes in the countryside are well-off families of productive age in the hinterlands of cities and people who want to change their lifestyle.

Productive agriculture has stopped being the dominant function of the countryside in regards to employment, the economy and way of life. The current role of Czech agriculture is keeping a certain level of employment and landscape maintenance. Forestry is a significantly more lucrative sector than agriculture in many areas.

The countryside provides second homes to the urban population. Considering the lack of capital in the countryside, the owners of many sites of agro and rural tourism are urban dwellers that do not have a relationship to specific rural communities. On the other hand, rural dwellers are not always inclined toward the development of such activities. The aging rural population is interested in a conservative way of life.

In relation to demographic development, schools are gradually disappearing from rural municipalities. The loss of schools marks the irreversible cultural downfall of the community. But, the demand for social infrastructure is growing, including elderly housing, medical treatment centres, and general senior services.

The current Moravian countryside can be broken up into three basic types: suburbanized countryside in the surroundings of large and medium-size cities, the easily accessible countryside of Moravian valleys and peripheral rural regions.

Urban activities have expanded to the countryside. They are accessible to an ever larger group of the rural population. Urban inhabitants take advantage of the countryside for their free time activities. Thus, the conception of the backwardness of rural life is dying away. On the other hand, the countryside has several important functions; it offers an alternative to the urban way of life. The maintenance of the landscape is another function of the countryside. In the era of globalization, the Moravian countryside contributes to preserving local and regional traditions.

Czech is a country of very small communities. Problems with ensuring the basic aspects of daily life are apparent. The problem of state administration has been dealt with by creating a network of offices with extended competence, whose job is to ensure the functions of state administration on a professional level for which small municipalities are not equipped. The problem of self-governance has been dealt with by voluntarily combining municipalities into associations.

There are a great number of partial studies, but comprehensive studies do not exist in Czech literature. Using definitions emphasizing location, territory and region, the research approaches will be based in geography. Besides rural geography, disciplines working with the landscape are applicable in this approach. When perceiving the countryside as a way of life, sociology in particular is preferred. Demography and disciplines dealing with gender issues are related. In these regards, peripheral, but indispensable disciplines include those that deal with economic and technological questions of sectors and activities at work in the countryside, i.e. agriculture, tourism, services, housing, etc. Quantitative, qualitative and field methods should mutually complement each other.