

Krystyna SZAFRANIEC

*Polish Academy of Sciences Institute of Rural and Agricultural Development,
Warsaw, Poland
krystyna.szafraniec@umk.pl*

RURAL – URBAN, CENTRAL – PERIPHERAL: DURABILITY OF CIVILISATION DIVIDES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF YOUTH

ABSTRACT

In most developed countries both rural area and agriculture have undergone fundamental metamorphosis quite a long time ago. Agriculture turned into farming, and peasants became farmers subordinated to the market rules of modern society. Until recently they constituted quite big part of rural world, and in a modern rhetoric, this world itself was located somewhere in the past (as something about to disappear, dependent, as the ballast of development). That was the meaning of Robert Redfield's rural vs urban area antonym, which has been obligatory in sociology for several decades. Contemporary Polish village (and farmers) are far from both stereotypical social images, as well as from scientific notions, but the rural–urban division is still the problem in Poland. There is a question put in this paper: how durable these divisions can be from the perspective of rural youth – their aspirations, life-orientations and life strategies.

Key words: rural area, rural youth, social change.

JEL Classification: Q01, R11.

1. INTRODUCTION

When we speak about a civilisation project for Poland and look for new social divides which must be taken into account, the rural issue apparently comes into the equation. In social consciousness a view is embedded that our rural and agrarian areas are our weakness which limits our developmental potential and social changes. Whatever the reasons for this view, the divide into rural and urban areas, Poland A and Poland B, is frequently referred to and just as frequently exaggerated, supporting thus various stereotypes and prejudices (Szafraniec, 2003). Do they also concern the young generation?

Rural areas in Poland are subject to dynamic transformation, and villages more and more rarely call up associations with rusticity, agriculture or general civilisation backwardness. The image of rural areas and its reception across the society is changing positively. The favourable balance of migration and growing interest among young people in the countryside as a future place of residence can

be used as an example here. However, it does not mean that the problem of rural areas and regional differences in Poland has been resolved. Neither the changes happen as rapidly as one could have expected, nor do they happen in parallel in terms of geography and social structure. Not all of them are positive. The constant large number of small farms (although land concentration was expected in agriculture) is highly disturbing. The succession to economically weak farmsteads (which shows that in the face of no employment and non-agricultural life prospects an economically non-viable farm seems – from an individual perspective – the best possible solution). This phenomenon gives rise to many questions which could form the basis of a separate paper. Here, we only want to discuss the questions concerning the young generation – whether their aspirations and life goals, educational decisions, place of residence can be conducive to changes (inside and outside rural areas) or rather impede them?

Our perspective is located in a broader sociological thinking about youth as an agent of social change. Various factors instigate social change - it is also brought about by generations. It is frequently stated that if generational change is not taking place, the world is not moving forward. What is characteristic of such moments are expectations harboured by the society and the hopes connected with the rise of the younger generation. Also when society faces tasks of particular historical significance, we turn to the young and assume that their innovativeness will allow for tackling new challenges. They have more energy, are more open and critical towards the world, and more often formulate long-term life goals. However, the potential of a generation is not determined by the characteristic features of the young, but by attitudes and predispositions forged in youthhood under specific historical conditions.

Empirical basement in this paper includes existing data collected by Central Statistical Office (GUS) and other official institutions, original data collected in sociological surveys done on representative samples (among them the semi-panel named POLES) and collected among the young. In these last two types of study I was personally involved as an author or co-author.

2. RURAL AREAS AS A LIVING ENVIRONMENT OF YOUNG PEOPLE – DEMOGRAPHIC AND SOCIAL CHANGES

Rural areas have a population of nearly 15 210 859 thousand people, that is 39.5% of the total Polish population, which has remained quite constant from the end of World War II. The number of young people living there is also greater – 17.9%% aged 0-19 (14.3% in cities) and 23.4% aged 20-34 (23.6% in cities).¹

¹ Based on: *Population. Size and structure in territorial division. As at June 30, 2013*, Central Statistical Office (GUS), Warsaw 2014.

In early transformation period one of the more outstanding Polish sociologists wrote: *the fact that peasants still exist proves the country's backwardness* (Mokrzycki, 2001). In this context peasants (and farming) were thought to be a holdover and developmental ballast. They really didn't be ready to go into rules of free market and – being their victims – they became the opponents of transformation processes. Our accession to the EU (support given by the CAP) has definitely changed the condition of farmers and rural area in Poland. Today they are the biggest beneficiaries of public money from the EU (30,5 bln EURO through 2007-2013) and the sensitive subject of the inner transformation processes, although their percentage in social structure is still diminishing.

Generally Polish society becoming increasingly less agricultural. In the communist period this sector gave employment to 27.8% of the population, now it is 12,8%. But not only the society becoming increasingly less agriculture. Rural area is becoming increasingly less agricultural. In the early 1990s over 60% of rural families earned their income on agriculture, in 2011 – 27%. For hardly 17% of farmers families a farm is the only or main source of income. Since the year 2000 we have had a positive balance of migration to rural area (representatives of new vocational categories have arrived to there), so the social structure in rural area has become more heterogeneous (with representatives of 'new' social classes: clerks, entrepreneurs, residents). Although countryside is dominated by professionally passive population (pensioners, unemployed), and people with lower social status among the employed, groups non-specific to rural area are more and more visible (they are specialists, senior civil servants, office workers, entrepreneurs and people with professional qualifications).

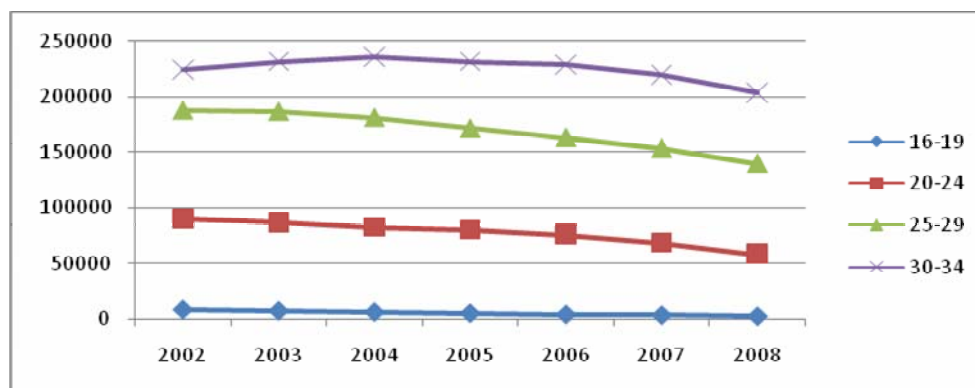
Table 1
Changes in social structure in rural area – economically active population

Structure of the employed population and jobs	2009	2013
farmers, gardeners, fishermen, foresters	30.9	27.4
senior civil servants, managers	2.2	2.8
specialists	7.0	9.3
office workers	4.4	4.7
technicians and middle-level personnel	5.9	5.2
service providers (personal service and sellers)	9.2	10.9
blue collar workers and craftsmen	21.7	22.5
machine operators and assemblers	9.3	9.5
non-qualified workers	8.1	7.4
uniformed services	0.3	0.4

Source: analysis by M. Halamska based on Social Diagnosis 2009 and Social Diagnosis 2013 (panel conducted on the national representative sample).

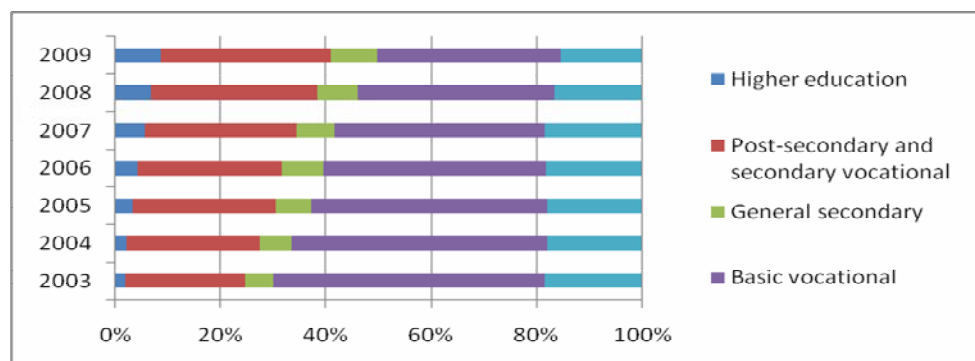
All the changes are of ambivalent nature. Agriculture is not as decisive as it could be expected. Young generation is clearly less interested in becoming farmers (Figure 1). This process is consistent, although variably intensive in different

regions. Young people take over farmsteads mostly in the eastern and central regions, where is no better alternative to agriculture, and on the other hand in Wielkopolska region, where the tradition of good farming has existed for ages.



Source: Own study based on the statistics of the Labour Force Survey (BAEL) and Agricultural Social Insurance Fund (KRUS).

Figure 1. Number of young farmers – changes after the year 2000 (in thousands).



Source: Own study based on the statistics of the Labour Force Survey (BAEL) and Agricultural Social Insurance Fund (KRUS).

Figure 2. Changes in the educational status of young farmers.

Young successors to farmsteads are increasingly better educated, have professional knowledge. The number of people with higher education is on the increase (from 2.1% in 2003 to 8.9% in 2009 and 15% among the owners of big farms in 2014), while the number of people with lower educational status is decreasing (basic vocational and lower – from 70% in 2003 to 50% in 2009). This reflects the qualitative changes in the agriculture, but also a more general trend – changes in the educational structure of the rural population (Table 2).

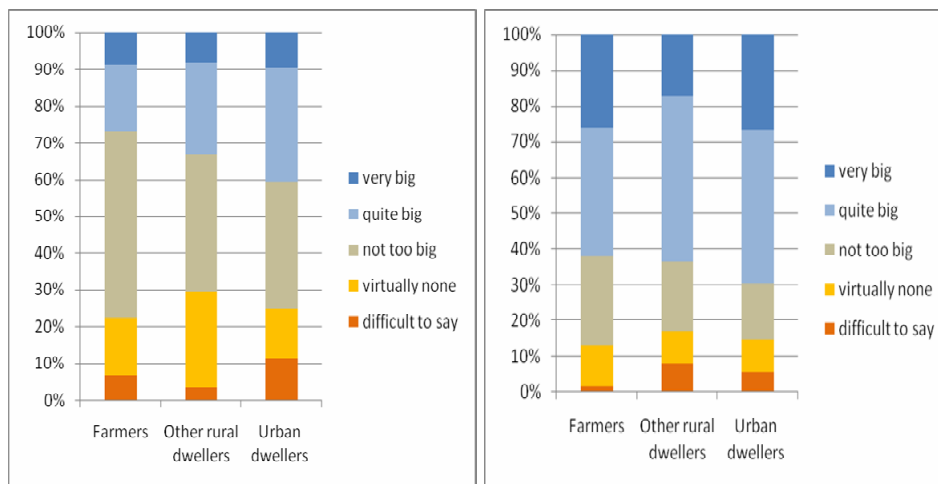
Table 2
Changes in educational structure among the rural population (in %)

Level of education	1998	2002	2008	2011
Lower-secondary and elementary	60.9	44.1	33.6	37.7
Basic vocational	24.2	29.2	33.6	26.4
Secondary education	13.1	22.4	25.3	25.3
Higher education	1.8	4.3	7.5	9.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Own study based on data of Central Statistical Office (GUS).

The educational profile among parents of young people in education has definitely improved (every 10th rural parent and every 4th urban parent have higher-education qualifications). This brings substantial changes to the socializing context and developmental conditions of rural children and young people. Rural parents believe more in educational success of their children (see Figure 2), although they do not have sufficient competences to help navigate the development of their children and educational decisions. They can feel that they do not have a good grasp of the modern world, access to the knowledge about new lifestyles, operating of the global markets, new forms of employment, new technological tools (Internet) etc.

Similar trends (of explicit changes, although still at a distance) can be observed in other areas. Material conditions of rural families are improving. The income per household is increasing (from PLN 1887 in 2003 to PLN 2399 in 2007 and nowadays the average income in rural area account 2/3 of the average income in urban area).



Source: Own study based on semi-panel POLES 2000 and 2011.

Figure 3. What is the possibility that the eldest child will complete higher education? (2000, N = 1696 and 2011, N = 1202).

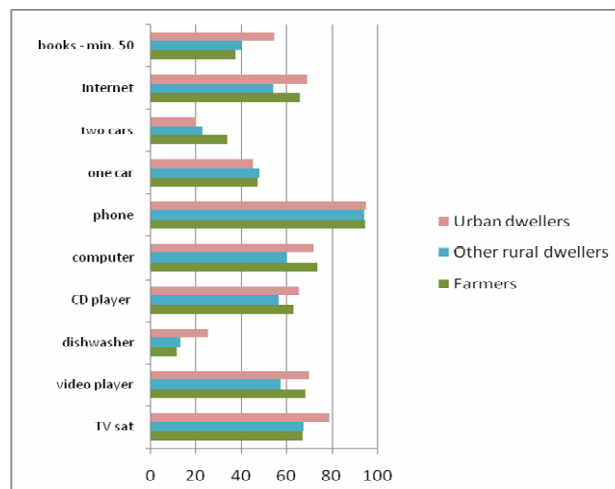
The greatest dynamics can be observed among farmers and young people. Nevertheless, the average rural income is still lower than the average income in

Poland (by 20%), the average urban income is higher by 12.5%.² These differences – as shown above – are even greater in the case of young people, and therefore the satisfaction with one's material status, clearly on the increase in this group since 2006, decreased in 2010 and remains at a striking distance to most of the urban centres.

The greater number of durable goods in rural households (Figure 4), better housing conditions (consistent with higher norms compared cities in terms of metric area³) change the standards of living of rural young people.

At the same time there are polarisation processes in rural areas. Families which belong to local elites (white-collar workers with higher education, state agents, rich farmers) have the best conditions. Families of blue-collar workers and non-salaried people have the least favourable conditions. The former invest in development and education of their children by sending them to good schools and universities, and thus enable their advancement. The latter are most often weak-willed, their children have short and basic education, following life roles observed in the closest environment.

The differences between regions do not disappear. It is – on the one hand – a division into eastern and western Poland, on the other hand into peripheral regions, where traditional agriculture prevails, and those located around large cities (Figure 5). The divisions have been created to a great extent as a result of tradition and history, but also insufficient investments which could have activated non-agricultural labour markets and stopped the drain of young people from the specific regions.

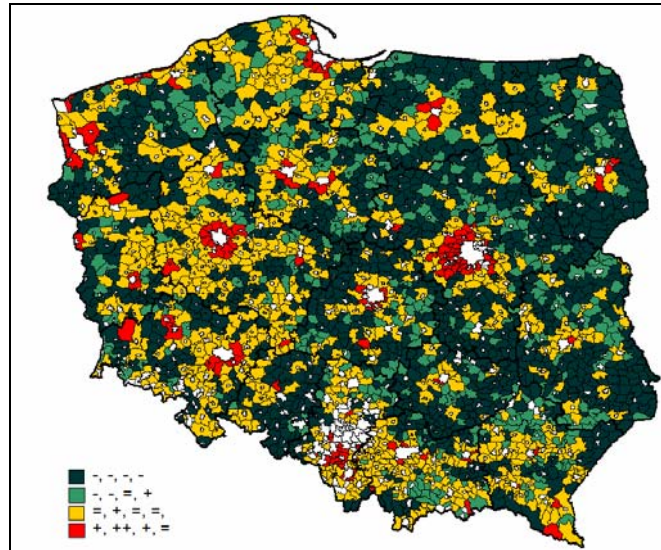


Source: Own study based on semi-panel "POLES" (research conducted in 2011, N = 1202).

Figure 4. Durable goods in households by place of residence.

² The greatest dynamics can be observed among families of farmers – see: *Households budget in 2010*, Central Statistical Office (GUS), Warsaw, 25 May 2011, p. 21 et seq.

³ An average metric area of an urban flat is 63.4 m², a rural flat – 93.9 m², in the case of farmers 116 m² – see *Households...*, p. 12.



Source: A. Rosner, M. Stanny, K. Heffner, *Diversification of rural area development*, Warsaw 2008: IRWiR PAN, p. 220.

Figure 5. Level and dynamics of the socio-economic development of rural communes.⁴

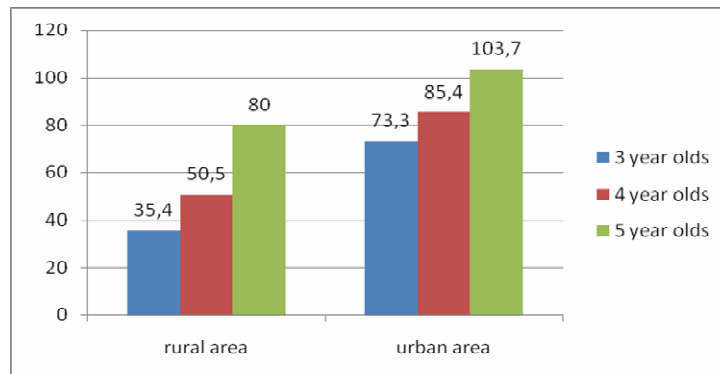
The regional divisions are paralleled by differences in status. Where traditional agriculture prevails, there are also more low-status families, and there also, to some extent automatically, symptoms of other harmful factors can be observed: hardly active labour market, high rate of registered and non-registered unemployment, low income level, poor infrastructure and non-expansive schools in terms of overcoming environmental barriers. Young people originating from such regions have much greater distance to cover – not only as a result of poorer environment, but also poorer family socialisation and educational support. The accumulation of these factors gives rise to problem areas which are unable to generate their own developmental opportunities. To overcome them, an external intervention is necessary – not so targeted at a micro level (the programmes *Leader* and *Leader Plus* are known to have been seriously criticised), but at long-term development strategies for specific regions.⁵

⁴ The description of the types of dynamics comprised four synthetic (multidimensional) indices: level of economic development, level of social development, dynamics of changes and activity of local authorities. Legend: (-) very low; (-) low; (=) average; (+) high; (++) very high in relation to economic development, social development, dynamics of changes, activity of local authorities respectively.

⁵ See: *Poland 2030. Third wave of modernity. National long-term development strategy*, Chancellery of the Prime Minister, Warsaw 2011, and: *National Regional Development Strategy*, Ministry of Regional Development, Warsaw 2010.

3. EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR RURAL YOUTH

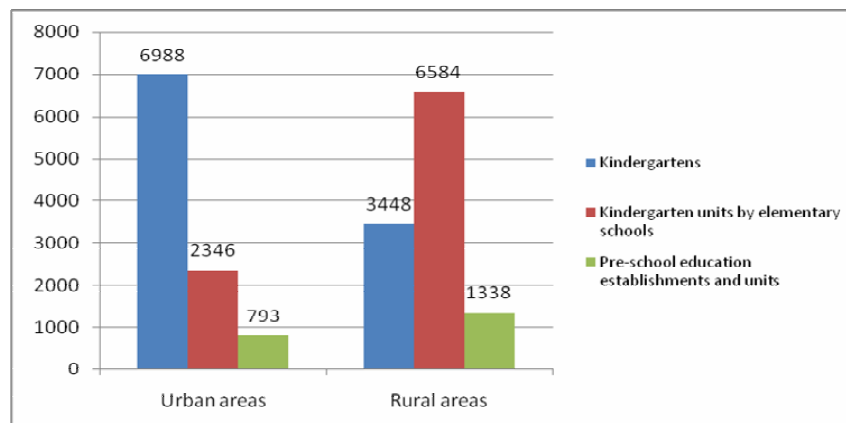
Pre-school education, which is the most important stage in creating equal educational opportunities as it covers an early developmental phase, is not common in rural areas. While in cities most 3-4 year olds attend pre-school establishments, in rural areas most of them stay at home (Fig. 6).



Source: Schooling and education in the school year 2013/2014, Central Statistical Office (GUS), Warsaw 2014: 63.

Figure 6. Percentage of urban and rural children attending pre-school establishments.

Rural children are raised in familiar environment, far away from strangers, however they do not have stimulation providing them with new social relations, new types of experience or a different type of sensitivity. Furthermore, children attending pre-school institutions, in contrary to urban children, mostly attend kindergarten units by schools, not kindergartens (Fig. 7).



Source: Schooling and education in the school year 2013/2014, Central Statistical Office (GUS), Warsaw 2014: 62.

Figure 7. Urban and rural pre-school education establishments.

The regional differences are substantial – the greatest percentage of children attending kindergartens can be found in the western provinces, the smallest – in central and eastern Poland as these regions are to a greater extent agricultural areas, and as a consequence have lower level of professional activity among women. As a result, there are no institutional services of children care (“because women do not work either way”), and in this context they are secondarily related to the traditional roles, which reinforces differences between regions.

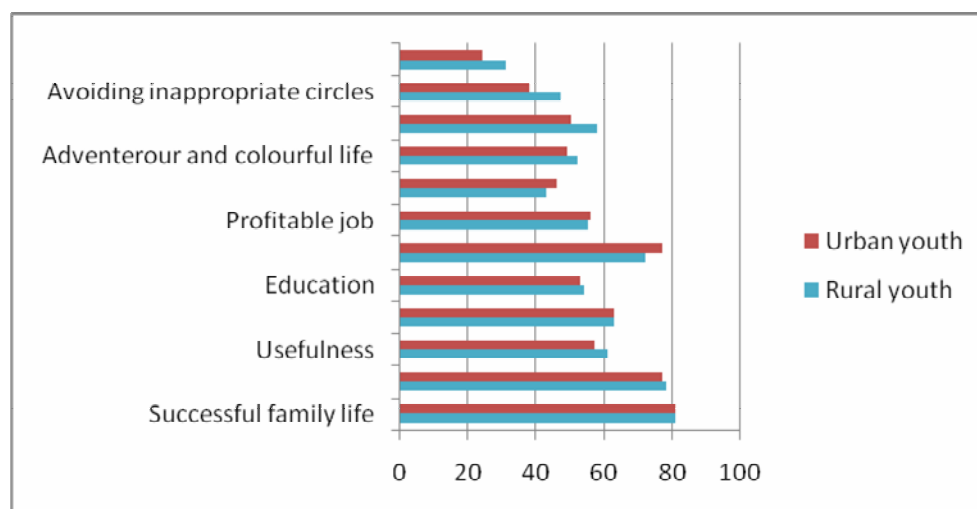
Rural young people, as a majority of Polish young people aspiring to higher education, chooses mainly general secondary schools (56% of lower-secondary students), usually, however, these are schools with lower level of teaching and requirements. More and more often they choose technical upper-secondary schools. Over a period of 10 years, the interest in these schools have increased by 10 pp – from 24.4% in 2003 to 34.1% (Domalewski 2011). For over a decade rural young people have been observed to show strong interest in higher education (up to nearly 70% of secondary school graduates at its peak). In the traditional academic establishments rural young people make on average 21% of the total number of students, in the new ones up to 35%. Rural young people usually choose those universities and courses which offer more lenient enrolment procedures – the smaller competition at the start, the greater percentage of rural young people.

Another important factor underlying their preferences and educational decisions is the certainty of employment guaranteed by specific university studies – rural secondary school graduates more often enrol in traditional courses which enable acquiring a “specific” profession (e.g. teacher’s), imaginable to them. They also apply to those universities which have fewer applicants. They employ characteristic progressive strategies – gradually raise their standards and reach successive goals, which is greatly supported and promoted by the significant others, experienced successes and new challenges. Due to their exceptional motivation to learn combined with intellectual advantages, rural young people are frequently better students than their urban peers (Wasielowski 2014).

4. RURAL YOUNG PEOPLE – LIFE ASPIRATIONS AND LIFE ORIENTATIONS

In the processes of system-wide transformation, and in particular in the era of great civilisation challenges, the question whether or not rural young people are sufficiently open-minded and whether or not they manage, will stand out against urban young people, is an important issue. Undoubtedly, they cannot be considered life minimalists. Although more modest than urban young people, they

intend to pursue various careers and lifestyles. 40% of rural (and nearly 60% of urban) young people aspire to high social status. Young people are entirely not interested in the prospect of being a farmer – 0.1% of young people⁶ declared ready to work as farmers in 1998, while 0.2% (a few persons against a population of several thousand) ten years later. 30% of rural (and 50% of urban) young people aspire to high income (starting salary of PLN 3500). Rural young people slightly more frequently come to terms with rank and file job positions. Twice as often they accept the principle of living modestly (36% compared to 18% in cities). Nevertheless their idea about a successful life little deviates from the ideas held by (demanding) urban young people – they focus on affiliation values, interesting job, good social status, and a colourful life of luxury (Figure 8).

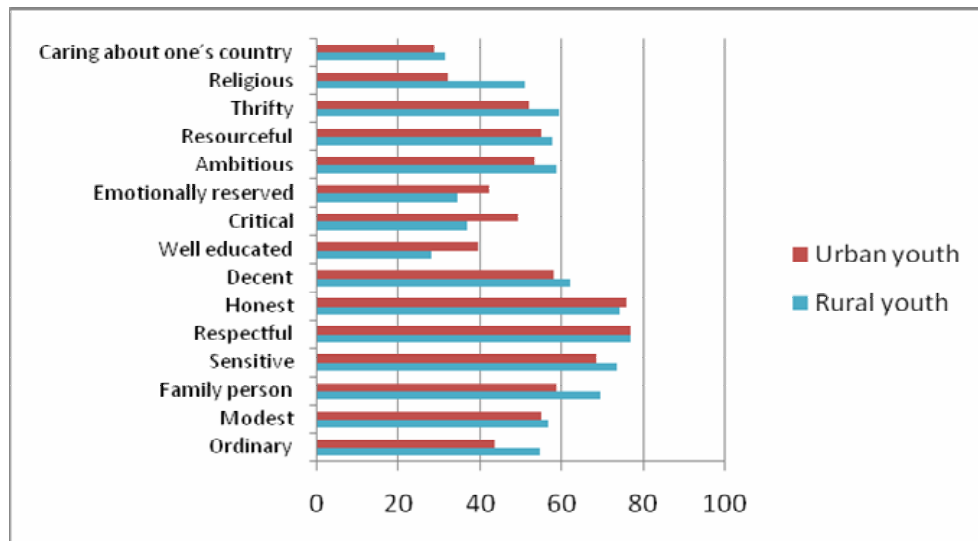


Source: Own study “The abandoned generation” – educational paths and entering adulthood, 2008.

Figure 8. Important matters for 19-year-old rural and urban young people.

Self-descriptions of rural and urban teenagers are similar, but rural youths more explicitly cultivate tradition-specific traits (attachment to family, religion, modesty, thriftiness, resourcefulness, artfulness), they are more conventional, ordinary, oriented towards the acceptance of their environment (Figure 9). These traits are less prominent, as compared to the past (especially morals and opinions have changed), nevertheless, in terms of the tradition vs (post)modernity axis, rural young people are closer to the first axis pole, which can be observed not as much in numbers as in their mentality.

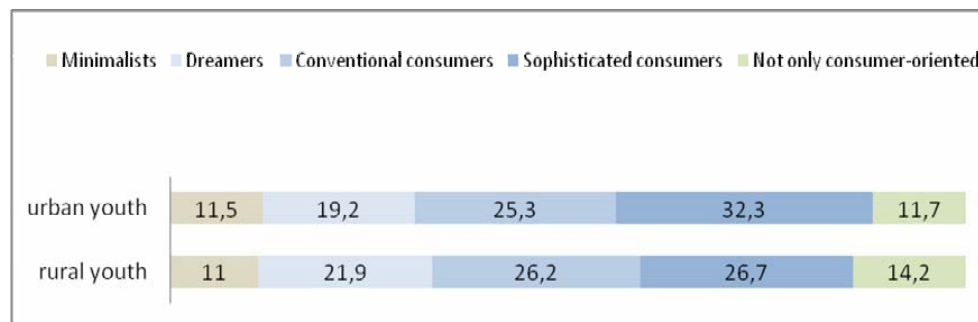
⁶ Complete population survey comprising 15-year-old young people starting secondary school in the Toruń Province (N = 4651).



Source: Own study "The abandoned generation" – educational paths and reaching adulthood, 2008.

Figure 9. Self-descriptions of 19-year-old rural and urban young people.

Nevertheless differences between rural and urban youth are not generally strong – the younger cohort the smaller distance. It is particularly visible in the area of life orientations (Figure 10). The majority of rural youth – just like their urban peers – demonstrates more or less interest in consumerism (Figure 9).



Source: Own study "The abandoned generation" – educational paths and entering adulthood, 2008.

Figure 10. Life orientations among rural and urban 19 year olds.

These trends suggest that the young – regardless of where they live – are a very distinctive product of the consumerist society. Only 11% among them do not interested in participation of consumer society benefits. All the rest is involved in them – difference concerns the style. Consumption-related expectations among youth are more common and more powerful than among the adults. The preferences,

however, do not always portend active life strategies leading to acquiring the desired goods (see the representatives of dreamers).

The economic crisis has great corrective significance here. The youth senses these changes and relates them to its preferences and expectations. Today – under the influence of unstable future – young people tend to eliminate dreams of a dashing career, vibrant life style in favour of the “quiter” option involving a peaceful and secure life based on a stable job and good, warm relations with closest friends and family. Nevertheless their readiness to take on various jobs, to change jobs, employers, place of residence is comparable to the mobility of urban youth (the greatest in the case of job changes – 52%, the smallest in the case of place of residence changes – 30%).

5. FUTURE OF RURAL AREA FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF YOUNG PEOPLE’S LIFE DECISIONS

What future awaits rural area? Will it be teeming with life or become depopulated? At the end of the last decade it was still considered a worse place of living. Today, these views have significantly changed which is as much a result of positive changes in rural areas as of the increased risk of living elsewhere. The view that rural areas offer no prospects for young people is to a greater extent characteristic for the rural elderly (60%) than young people (45%) which is a considerable change in comparison with the past. Nowadays 50% of rural and 13% of urban young people declare their willingness to live in the countryside. These are more often young people from families with relatively lower status, more often boys than girls, people with less successful educational career and less demanding towards life, but concerned about ecology, living far from city uproar, oriented towards life harmony.

Who returns to live in rural area having completed their education and why? On the one hand, these are people with lower-status education and less useful professional qualifications who cannot afford independent life in a city. In rural areas they most often fuel the ranks of the unemployed⁷, emigrants⁸, members (or successors) of their father’s farmstead. On the other hand, these are graduates of secondary schools and universities (also from cities) who find employment in self-government administration, NGO networks or local cultural and educational institutions.

⁷ In 2007 there were 59.1% unemployed people at the age of 34, in 2009 63.7%; in cities 51.3% and 52% respectively.

⁸ Young residents in rural area make the greatest group of emigrants: 43.6% permanent emigrants and 85.6% temporary emigrants.

Who does not return to live in rural area? Most of university graduates (2/3) do not come back. They are attracted to urban agglomerations and regions with greater development dynamics. "Brain drain" processes start as soon as the selection of university – the best secondary school graduates leave their own regions and go to centres with greater dynamics and development. There are more women among them. The reasons include the labour market, or rather the lack thereof in rural areas, also the aspiration of contemporary women for independence and life partners with a higher or at least comparable status and promising life prospects.

If in the second half of the 1990s we still wondered whether rural young people would be able to face the challenges of the transformation period – whether they would manage to integrate into the newly emerging series of changes and be able, with their (educational, life) decisions and choices, to overcome the social structure reproduction processes in rural areas, then these concerns have now disappeared. These young people are different than their peers from the past and represent the greatest mental similarities to urban young people. It does not mean that the specific features of rural young people are fading away. They are still more traditional, more conventional in their choices and less pampered by life. They more often accept such situation. At the same time their problem is that their awakened life aspirations can be expressed neither in rural areas nor elsewhere – the possibilities offered in rural areas are not sufficiently diversified and extensive, while large urban centres are too competitive and expensive for a start into an independent life. The decision to live in the countryside is still considered an emergency option, it guarantees safer survival for those who are not sufficiently ready to compete for a social position in a city.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The agricultural sector – although not entirely unattractive for young people – shows astonishing survival ability. The reasons for that include – on the one hand – positive changes in agriculture and management, while on the other hand the absorptive power of non-agricultural labour markets which narrow down the possibilities of rural young people.

The processes of generational exchange accelerate the internal polarisation of rural areas which will contribute both to greater emergence of modern agriculture and rural entrepreneurship, and expansion (especially in some regions – where the modernisation processes are poorly advanced) of poverty margins serviced by social transfers.

The reduced opportunities of economic migration to EU countries, affected in some respects with much more serious downturn in the economy than Poland, can

intensify social problems in rural areas. The inertness in reviving labour markets in agricultural regions will deepen the existing differences between the centre and the peripheral areas.

Therefore it is so important to develop management strategies for large investments which would prevent the establishment and extension of differences between regions – equally important as the investments in the development of the digital network and infrastructure in rural areas which could not only change the occupational prospects of the young generation, but also reduce the mental, social and civic exclusion thanks to the availability of such areas where the life of most urban young people happens.

Although the historical differences between regions are becoming less distinct, their place is taken by differences dictated by the rules of the free market economy. While more active centers generate pull factors - attract investors, people looking for a job and comfortable life, more passive area generates push factors and becomes poorer. And there is nobody who would stop this trend. Could historic decision were not possible in the postmodern world?

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