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## FROM POLICY TO MISERY? THE STATE AGRICULTURAL FARMS VS. 'THE RURAL'

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**ABSTRACT:** 1989 was a turning point in the socio-economic development in the former Eastern bloc, initiating a systemic transformation that affected the society at large. It also contributed to the crystallisation of certain cultural landscapes, hitherto largely illegible due to the inhibition of spatial processes encountered during socialism. In Poland, after a quarter-century of a free market economy, the focus on social problems began to expand to the spatial realm as well. It became apparent that the progressive social polarisation that followed was most prominent in environments striated by a particular landscape type – the former State Agricultural Farm (PGR). Considering PGRs as 'the epitome of rurality' subject to ideas informing about the direction of contemporary 'rural development' prompts a different way of looking at the problem. In this paper, we investigate the concept of rurality in the discursive tenor of implemented policy and contrast it with contextualised empirical examples. Our findings suggest that an efficient policy should be confronted with the expectations of residents at the local level, and introducing top-down actions usually ends in failure as in the case of post-PGR estates.

**KEY WORDS:** post-socialist estates, Eastern Europe, rural development, rurality, transformation

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### Introduction

State Agricultural Farms (PGRs) were established at different scales in all countries in East-Central Europe after the Second World War as a counterbalance to private farming. They were to create "enclaves of socialist forms of agriculture" (Wilkin 1997). They stemmed from the fact

that in line with the binding socialist ideology, the countryside was deemed a potential threat for the very foundations on which the state was organised. The causes were twofold: the rural population adhered to the traditional values, also being deeply religious, and was characterised by low productivity which was contrary to how the authorities understood progress. The

transformation method applied consisted in the industrialisation and urbanisation of the countryside. In the countries of real socialism, this process is called PGRisation (Korab 1997).

State Agricultural Farms in Poland, which in line with the socialist ideology were called the “centres of agricultural culture and progress” (Psyk-Piotrowska 2011), were established by virtue of a decree of 1944 regarding the introduction of a new agricultural policy resulting from the emerging new socio-economic system (Decree of the Polish... 1944) and quickly became the most common form of organising large farms (in their peak period they amounted to 1,112 – Ziętara 2005, cited in Kraciński 2011: 41). They existed as a type of economic organisation of agriculture from mid-1950s until the beginning of the 1990s. Their advent was accompanied by changes in the settlement spatial structure: PGRs comprised housing estates intended to meet the living needs of its workers. Some of them were heterogeneous structures (e.g. Jackowo, selected for examination and to be introduced later). The distinctiveness of this type of estates was reflected primarily: (a) in the aspects related with an estate’s morphology – the built-up area differed from what was traditional in that it was a condensed form comprising low blocks of flats; and (b) in the social aspect as they were characterised by a high turnover of employees with different backgrounds, often impoverished, differing in customs, which prevented them from developing a bond with their place of residence (Psyk-Piotrowska 1996, 1998, 2004; Sakson 2003; Borowski 2013).

As a result of political and economic changes in Poland after 1989, the PGR estates were badly hit by the effects of transformation: bankruptcy, devastation of property, setting fields aside, unemployment, and in consequence social exclusion and phenomena considered socially undesirable. These areas are an extreme example of the countryside’s problems with economic insertion (Rosner 2002; Suliborski, Kulawiak 2017). This difficult situation followed primarily from the mismatch between the monofunctional farms and the new economic conditions, with the resulting collapse of the former, but also from the spatial isolation of the residents from labour markets (Rosner 2007).

Post-PGR estates were located in formally rural areas, which is particularly important in

Poland where a settlement is considered urban or rural on the basis of whether or not it holds the so-called town privileges. Notably, these privileges are granted by way of a legal act which is not always sufficiently motivated by facts (Dymitrow 2013, 2014, 2017; Biegańska 2019): many Polish villages are only formally so, and they meet a number of criteria of a town (mainly of up to around a dozen thousand residents); on the other hand, there are towns in stagnation (of less than a thousand residents) which exhibit no real differences from the surrounding ‘rural’ areas. The complicated situation regarding the urban or rural status of settlements is omnipresent in many countries of East-Central Europe as an aftermath of the history of the 20th century socialism. The era of socialism (the terms ‘state socialism’ or ‘communism’ are often used interchangeably by different authors) influenced the development of both formally urban and rural settlement networks (Jałowicki 1982). In the context of formally rural post-PGR estates, owing to the fact that they posed as towns (through industrialisation but without proper modernisation) their physiognomy experienced a further relocation of features commonly deemed urban and rural (cf. Pile 1999; Dymitrow et al. 2018).

Therefore, PGRs require special attention from researchers as highly problematic areas (the most difficult on the scale of all ‘rural areas’). If we try to find effective solutions for them, we must surely have an in-depth knowledge of their specificity in the context of socio-economic problems which affected those areas with the beginning of system transformation. However, with regard to the fact that for the last 25 years no effective solutions for stimulating their development have been found (cf. Tarkowska 2001; Karwacki 2002; Borowski 2013), we should consider this question: how is the development policy of post-PGR estates formed and does the current local policy correspond to the expectations and needs of the residents of post-PGR areas? This paper intends to assess the adequacy of the current policy’s direction and tools with respect to the expectations and needs of the population living in post-PGR estates. Given that in Poland the formal status of a unit defines the possibilities and character of remedial actions taken and the policy regarding a given area (Biegańska 2018; Dymitrow et al. 2018),

we would like to start from the very concept of rurality. In the next step, we will prove (on the basis of the diagnosis of the selected case study) which key elements (discussed in the theoretical part) have not been included in the scope of the policy applied. Our primary assumption is that the fundamental problem lies in the schematic and barely variable viewpoint on certain areas and the failure to take into account the local level because only there can we see the specificities of individual post-PGR estates, diagnose their problems and expectations. At the national level, the state policy is usually similar with regard to all rural areas, and even if the fact that certain solutions are addressed to post-PGR estates is taken into account, all such estates are treated likewise. A state policy implemented in such a way is ineffective. It is also worth noting that the issue of post-PGR estates was widely discussed in the beginning of the 21st century in the literature on the subject (sociological, geographical, economic, etc.). Due to the failed attempts at arriving at satisfactory and efficient assistance activities, interest in this issue has considerably weakened afterwards. This paper proposes another perspective. We assume that the weakness of previous solutions resulted from the fact that problems were diagnosed on a local scale but were not approached from a broader perspective and were not incorporated into the priorities of the implemented state policy taking account of the local context. The perspective we propose focuses on problems defined locally, and the needs and expectations of the residents of post-PGR villages. These considerations are preceded by theoretical discussion regarding the issue which justifies the adopted viewpoint on the problem described.

### **The concept of rurality and its links with the rural development policy in literature**

The division into 'urban' and 'rural' and 'the city' and 'the countryside', key in settlement geography, is one of the oldest and most common geographical dichotomies (Williams 1975). Originally, these terms were used to differentiate between the areas of the first cities, commonly separated by walls, and the open uncontrolled

spaces located outside their borders. For many centuries, the character of the latter was almost exclusively agricultural, and economic relations between the countryside in the city were based on mutual exchange of products and services. This created a relatively simple system which comprised two distinct and contrasting forms of settlement: the city and the countryside (Krzysztofik et al. 2017a). However, there is no doubt that nowadays, along with the gradual modernisation and urbanisation, it is increasingly difficult to delimit urban and rural areas (Copus 2006; Jonard et al. 2009; Szymańska, Biegańska 2011; Porta et al. 2013; Biegańska 2019). Therefore, the division into the city and the countryside has become artificial (Hoggart 1990; Halfacree 2009; Dymitrow, Stenseke 2016; Dymitrow 2018) and is often overused in geography (Cloke, Johnston 2005; Ruzicka 2012; Dymitrow 2018). K. Hoggart (1990: 245) states that:

The broad category 'rural' is obfuscatory, whether the aim is description or theoretical evaluation, since intra-rural differences can be enormous and rural-urban similarities can be sharp.

Despite problems with delimiting rural areas and defining the very category of 'the rural', it is clear that the idea of rurality is still broadly recognised in the society and 'the rural' has an incessantly clear and powerful meaning for many people (Woods 2011). The theoretical framework for the explanation of these meanings was provided by the introduction of the postmodern perspective, whose key issue was how people and institutions construct their own realities in order to make sense of the world, including conceptualising the rural (cf. Cloke, Davies 1992; Cloke, Milbourne 1992; Cloke et al. 1995; Dymitrow, Brauer 2017). Mormont (1990: 40) notes that

rurality is understood as a social construct – that is as an imagined entity that is brought into being by particular discourses of rurality that are produced, reproduced and contested by academics, the media, policy-makers, rural lobby groups and ordinary individuals. The rural is therefore “a category of thought”.

The shift of emphasis to the manner of perceiving the rural and the attempt to determine

what the rural is and should be has made the issue of how to study the rural a crucial task. Due to the fact that

the contemporary rural is complex space, created by the diverse and dynamic processes of imagination, representation, materialization and contestation (...) and taking on different forms in different contexts and from different perspectives (Woods 2011: 30),

the discursive approaches became the basis for studying the rural. The very concept of discourse, taken from the works of M. Foucault, is understood as the manner of understanding the world and presenting some visible relationships, practices and subjectivities, which shape the framework of our knowledge. Discourses include extensive networks of signs, symbols and practices which make our world/our worlds meaningful to ourselves but also to others. In this meaning, academic knowledge which refers to rural space and is produced by geographers is a certain discourse. However, it is only one of many types of such discourse. Among the important discourse types we can indicate: policy discourses of rurality which allow for discovering the countryside and shaping the policy for rural areas, media discourses of rurality which popularise and publicise the idea of rurality, and lay discourses of rurality which comprise beliefs, opinions, descriptions and actions of ordinary people in their daily lives (Woods 2011). However, taking into account the fact that policy discourses of rurality and media discourses of rurality place great emphasis on discovering and reaching the heart of rurality, what is only possible on the basis of an analysis of first-hand stories of rural life, i.e. lay discourses of rurality, the last among the listed discourses gains particular importance. It is also the basis for formulating geographical, academic knowledge of the countryside (cf. Jones 1995). Firstly, lay discourses of rurality give the opportunity to indicate how people in rural areas understand their locality to be rural; secondly, to determine who should and who should not be considered rural; thirdly, to track changes in rural communities; fourthly and most importantly, they form the lived experience of rural life and help determine the real needs of the rural areas' population (Woods 2011).

The proliferation of the postmodern approach and the social constructs of rurality (often highly subjective, not necessarily reflected in reality) on the one hand and the spatial dimension of geography as a science on the other, have enticed researchers to search for and work out a rural space model. One such model, commonly accepted by human geographers, was proposed by Halfacree (2006). It enables us to explain complicated dependencies between representations of the rural (formal classifications), rural localities (materiality, physical space) and the lived experiences of rural life (imagination, local perceptions) and, as the author himself explains, is the strategy of connecting dispersed elements which in aggregate create all we know of rural space. He also argues that rural space is imaginable, material and practiced and that it includes the approach based on locality and the one based on social representations in defining rurality (i.e. lay discourses of rurality). Both these approaches are strictly connected and in practice, the imagined and material rural spaces intersect. Social representations of rurality cannot exist without imagining certain kinds of rural locality, while the definitions of rural locality consist in updating individual ideas of what rurality should be like (Halfacree 2006; cf. Halfacree 1993).

Taking into consideration the cultural, social production of rurality based on lay discourses (which is key in the postmodern approach) on the one hand, and the local level where this production of rurality should be analysed on the other, Halfacree indicated the characteristics of state policy implemented in rural areas, as there can be no doubts that this policy is neither neutral nor objective. Firstly, the state acts in the interest of a larger area (e.g. a region) for which it is responsible. Therefore, 'rural areas' are only a part of a bigger area. Secondly, the principles of the state's actions are mostly dependent on current political ideologies which present a normative model for the functioning of the economy and the society, and the set guidelines for the legitimate actions of the state. State actors are constantly subject to lobbying from various pressure groups representing different interests and points of view on the rural. As a result, regulations which regard the rural and are implemented by the state are immersed in a dynamic, often disjointed process (Woods 2005).



We can name several stages in the creation of state policy regarding the rural. The first one consists in *defining and determining* the very nature of a 'rural area'. At this stage, the state produces its policy discourse and adopts certain parameters which are the basis for delimitation. Moreover, on the basis of statistical data it prepares reports which present a picture of and document the rural. These in turn are a source of information for policy makers and the basis for formulating the policy. Further stages include: identifying problems, preparing adequate legal acts intended to solve the identified problems, and implementing the adopted policy (Woods 2008).

The model of state policy implemented with regards to rural areas depends on many factors. One of these factors is the adopted viewpoint on the socio-economic problems in rural areas. On the basis of sociological studies, we can indicate at least two different approaches. In the first approach, the so-called conventional approach, the source of the problems is sought in people's attitudes. Schiller (2004) and Duncan (1999) indicate that in order to answer the question of how individual people suffer due to poverty, we should focus on the human capital at the disposal of these individuals. Due to the fact that it is difficult to explain e.g. the scale of poverty, its duration, its dependence on phases of human life, this approach is subject to criticism (Rank 2004). The second approach is the effect of this criticism: it locates the source of social inequalities in the social structure and not in individuals (the structural approach) (Lobao et al. 2008). If socio-economic problems are treated as a structural problem, this approach draws attention to the market that produces aggregate economic conditions and the state together with auxiliary institutions which dictates the framework for redistribution. The two key factors in this system are the availability and quality of jobs which determine e.g. the scale of poverty, and the role of the state as an institution which controls the distribution of these jobs and relies on the experience and knowledge of the civil society (Lobao et al. 2008).

While envisioning 'rural' and 'urban' spaces through the outlined three-fold model certainly helps make sense of the concepts' disjunctivity, in order to warrant political justification, they must be narrowed to a discussion in what way

they are problematic. It hence boils down to the issue of the internal consistency between the three facets of space (i.e. the degree to which the rural or urban label is consensual or contested) is influenced by the extent to which "economy, state and civil society mesh together in a relatively stable fashion at a local level" (Halfacree 2006: 52). The point is that when differences are produced (rather than induced), they "*presuppose the shattering of a system*" (Lefebvre 1991: 372). As Duncan and Savage (1989: 203) note,

in conducting explanation we should construct abstractions appropriate to the causal chain under investigation, including spatial specification if and when relevant.

Given that a characteristic of any spatial conceptualisation should, purportedly, conform to the prevailing physiographic, economic, social and demographic conditions, chasms can be avoided by systematically and continuously adapting existing conceptualisations to the changes encountered in the conditions that inform those conceptualisations. In this context, the state should undoubtedly have particular care for post-PGR estates.

## Field of study and adopted methodology

The area we selected for examination: the Jackowo<sup>1</sup> estate near a PGR which was formally liquidated in 1991, fits into the pattern of changes characteristic of post-PGR estates, described in chapter 1. The estate is located in central Poland and is formally a part of a bigger village. Jackowo is 3 km away from the nearest town (with a population of around 3000). Currently, the estate has 120 residents, most of which are former PGR workers and their families. Moreover, due to the fact that the Town and Commune Office transformed some of the privately-owned flats to social housing, in the beginning of the 21st century Jackowo acquired new residents. The estate itself (3.4 ha) is an isolated area located 1.3 km from the

<sup>1</sup> In order to prevent stigmatisation of residents and to ensure them greater anonymity, the name of the analysed post-PGR estate was changed.

proper village. Infrastructure formerly owned by the PGR is adjacent to the estate.

This paper is based primarily on the data obtained during a survey conducted in 2014 on a non-random sample (which is increasingly treated as an important alternative for probabilistic studies, cf. Reilly 1990; Crouch, Ritchie 2003; Daszkiewicz 2012), which was a direct result of the fact that we were unable to accurately estimate the population of the estate (some residents are not registered). The survey form contained primarily closed questions most often based on the rating scale (also in the form of a semantic differential). Some of the questions were organised as a matrix or based on the ranking method. The survey also included open questions which perform an important function in the study, although due to the objectivisation of the data obtained their number was deliberately limited. We surveyed a total of 31 individuals over 15 years of age, including 52% of women and 48% of men. Around 1/3 of the respondents were young people up to the age of 20, 2/3 of the respondents did not exceed the age of 45; the oldest of the surveyed was 60 years old. Therefore, on average we managed to examine every third person above 15 years of age, which gave us grounds to some generalisations and findings.

We supplemented the survey research with in-depth interviews conducted after the survey, when the respondents gradually managed to accustom themselves to the situation of questioning, and the previously-obtained material

indicated which issues require a more in-depth approach. We conducted a total of 10 interviews, differentiating respondents with regard to sex, age and professional activity. Due to the fact that the examined community was very tight, quantitative and qualitative research was performed with the help of a gatekeeper who introduced the authors to the community.

Information obtained from respondents during the study was supplemented and confronted with the knowledge of officials who are in contact with the areas of research and represent the competent Town and Commune Office. During the interviews we obtained detailed data regarding e.g. the estate's infrastructure, state of the built environment, diagnosed social problems and the quality of services offered by social assistance.

## Research results

### Perceived problems of the former PGR

We adopted the diagnosis of the most important socio-economic and material problems prevalent in the examined post-PGR estate as the starting point for investigating the policy and its instruments addressed to the residents of post-PGR estates.

The study shows that the most important and omnipresent problem in the estate is poverty indicated by 51.6% of the respondents. The

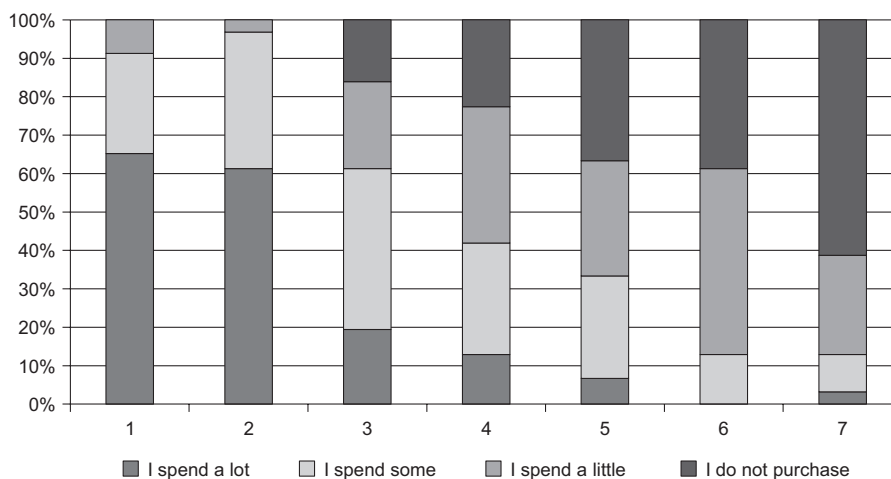


Fig. 1. Structure of answers to the question: "What do you and your family spend your money on?"

Source: own elaboration on the basis of survey

Explanation: 1 – current charges (water, electricity); 2 – food; 3 – clothes; 4 – better house equipment; 5 – entertainment; 6 – vacation; 7 – press.

residents indicate that "[w]e had a better life earlier. There were no great worries because everyone could afford everything." We even had such statements as: "sometimes we don't even have enough for bread with lard, and the kids are growing and are constantly hungry." 80% of the surveyed households lack the money to fulfil basic needs. Every sixth respondent is assisted by family and relatives, every tenth takes up loans and borrowings, every tenth disposes of their property or pledges it. Insufficient benefits cause food and current charges (electricity, water) to be the prevalent elements in the expenditure structure of Jackowo's residents. Far less frequently, the residents can afford to buy clothes or better household equipment. Press, entertainment or vacations are beyond their reach (Table 1, Fig. 1). Another considerable burden is the repayment of loans (every sixth respondent) and arrears in gas and electricity fees (every fourth respondent).

Apart from poverty, problems in Jackowo also include: family rows and fights (48.4%), theft (45.3%), fraud (41.9%), infidelity and prostitution (16.1%), and drug abuse (9.7%), often in conjunction with violence. However, the biggest social problem indicated by the residents themselves is alcohol abuse (54.8%) (Table 1).

Social problems, observed with quite extreme intensity, are accompanied by strong heterogeneity of the local community. In the opinion of most of the respondents, the main characteristic features of Jackowo are: low social cohesion (56.7%), very weak neighbourhood bonds (33.3%), then lack of implementation of community actions and sense of belonging to the local community which seeks to achieve common goals (Table 1). According to the declarations of the respondents, "people form groups which spend time together. These gobs that wander aimlessly. There's gossip everywhere." Apart from the lack of social cohesion, the residents must also deal with the problem of their otherness and isolation from neighbouring villages. They resulted mainly from PGR past of Jackowo which divided the inhabitants of considered estate and other settlements.

We supplemented the characteristic features of the estate with material problems. First of all, we examined the type of the built-up area and the estate's structure, furniture and equipment in flats and the housing needs of the residents. Regarding the type of the estate and the built-up

Table 1. Structure of answers from the questionnaire survey regarding some aspects of the socio-economic and material dimensions.

Answer	% of respondents
<b>A. Which of the following problems occur at Jackowo? (multiple answers possible)</b>	
Alcoholism	54.8
Poverty	51.6
Domestic violence	48.4
Theft	45.3
Fraud	41.9
Prostitution	16.1
Drug abuse	9.7
<b>B. In what way do you provide for your needs? (multiple answers possible)</b>	
We limit our needs	40.0
We look for extra work	30.0
We use our savings	20.0
We use the help of relatives	16.7
We undertake "other" activities, "fix" it somehow	10.0
We take loans, use borrowings	10.0
We sell or pawn property	10.0
We use the help from the Church/ Caritas	6.7
We rely on social assistance	3.3
<b>C. Are the residents of Jackowo close to one another?</b>	
Yes	3.3
Difficult to say	40.0
No	56.7
<b>D. Are the residents of Jackowo in good relations with the residents of the neighbouring settlements?</b>	
Yes	20.0
Difficult to say	46.7
No	33.3
<b>E. What amenities are there in your flat?</b>	
Bathroom	96.6
Toilet	93.1
Hot running water	78.7
Water supply	75.9
Central heating	64.4
<b>F. Which of the following do you have in your flat?</b>	
A place to work	16.1
A place to rest	12.9
A place to receive friends	9.7
<b>G. What do you miss the most in your apartment?</b>	
Renovation	76.7
More space	61.5
Better electronics and household appliances	57.5
Better furniture	30.0
More rooms	15.4

Source: questionnaire survey.



area, we should above all point to the fact that in Jackowo it is composed of low blocks of flats. These compact block houses introduce a discord in the surrounding landscape. The neglected blocks are an artificially incorporated element which contrasts with the physiognomy of the traditionally understood 'countryside'. Another characteristic feature of the estate is its aesthetic value, perceived as low. As noted by the residents, the estate is neglected, ugly, grey and dirty.

What is also important is how the flats are equipped with technical infrastructure. Having in mind the fact that the PGR estates posed as "centres of agricultural culture and progress", they were commonly (and often still are) quite well equipped with infrastructure as compared to other 'rural areas': according to the respondents 75.9% have a water supply system, 96.6% – a bathroom, 93.1% – a toilet, 78.7% – running hot water, 64.4% – central heating. Regardless, the psychosocial conditions in the flats are often very poor. Excessive overcrowding results in very few respondents who have their own place for work (16.1%), leisure (12.9%) or to receive friends (9.7%), let alone an own room. This contributes to the worsening of the already difficult family relationships (Table 1).

In the context of the expectations of the estate's residents regarding housing conditions, they were most lacking in: more space (61.5%), better electronics and household appliances (57.5%), better furniture (30.0%) and more rooms (15.4%). Many residents dream of a renovation (76.7%), but they would be far more willing to move out of Jackowo to look for decent living conditions (Table 1).

### **Opportunities to obtain assistance in post-PGR estates**

The problems characterised on the basis of the residents' opinions are at an advanced stage. This leads us to the question: what are the opportunities to obtain assistance for the residents of post-PGR estates and is the fact that they live in rural areas of any significance?

Looking for an answer, we consulted the National Research Report "Social assistance and integration for selected groups – a diagnosis of the standardisation of services and institutions'

models" and interviews conducted with the employees of the Social Welfare Centre operating within the local Town and Commune Office.

The report and interviews unequivocally confirmed that the opportunities to obtain assistance for people in difficult life situations are mainly determined by the formal status of the estate or settlement. While cities report a high standard of social assistance services, the standard of such services in the countryside is described as low (Szarfenberg 2011: 49). This is determined by many factors. First and foremost, rural communes or urban-rural communes (such as the one where Jackowo is located – the surveyed social workers consider the commune 'rural' because its physiognomy and development opportunities are barely different from those of the surrounding rural areas), commonly poorer, follow a different philosophy of activities than urban communes. Their priority is to stimulate entrepreneurship, assist companies and the economy, and this is what they allocate their limited resources to.

What is more, there is a difference between the offer of assistance available in the so-called 'urban' and 'rural' Social Welfare Centres. The 'urban' institutions much more often (65%) cooperate with a number of specialists (vocational counsellors, coaches, psychologists, psychiatrists) and institutions (Labour Offices, the Police, the Municipal Guard, etc.) and those specialists and institutions are commonly more available to all social assistance recipients. On the other hand, in the 'rural' institutions this cooperation is much more limited (it often boils down to small ad hoc financial benefits or financing the purchase of food and fuel). Moreover, as noted by one of the surveyed Social Welfare Centre workers in Izbica Kujawska,

[t]he city has foundations, associations, other support centres, night shelters, orphanages and many others to help. In the countryside, in an area such as our commune there are no such things, so this assistance is very limited.

Another significant facet of the assistance is the current assessment and diagnosis of the needs of people in difficult life situations. 'Rural' assistance institutions far less frequently than on average conduct (32%, as compared to 48% in 'urban' institutions) or commission (13%, as compared to

32% in 'urban' institutions) research and expert reports intended to determine the local needs in the field of social assistance. Due to the fact that the number of employees is limited there, and that as a result they are less specialised, actions to adjust the offer to existing needs are taken less frequently (Szarfenberg 2011: 49). For the same reason, projects funded from external sources are implemented very infrequently (10%, with 34% in 'urban' assistance institutions) (Szarfenberg 2011: 49). One of the surveyed Social Welfare Centre workers adds,

[t]he actions of social assistance are more and more based on the project/competition system. Projects are available to anyone – the chances are equal. However, our rural areas have a problem resulting from the lack of employees who could prepare, carry out, account for a project (...). In a situation when in accordance with the law the number of employees is at the minimum level of four, they are not able to apply.

As is clear from the selection of examples presented above, the opportunities to obtain assistance differ dramatically according to the formal status of a settlement. Post-PGR estates, formally rural, located in communes which are *de jure* rural and urban-rural (in fact also meaning rural) have a slim chance to obtain assistance only due to the status of the settlement. Taking into account the scale of problems which are currently inscribed into their character, the very manner of implementing policy in Poland ("rural policy" in this case) gives the residents no chance of receiving a full scope of high-quality assistance, which is particularly desired in post-PGR estates.

### **Assessment of assistance measures offered to the residents of post-PGR estates**

We characterised the problems identified by respondents from Jackowo, demonstrating that they are very severe and multifaceted, investigated the opportunities to obtain assistance in view of the formal status of the estate and determined that e.g. in Polish conditions they are quite limited as compared to the cities. Afterwards, we verified how the residents assessed assistance measures offered by institutions at a various levels, NGOs and others.

We primarily asked the surveyed people about who really cares about their plight and the living conditions of the family. The institution closest to their place of residence, i.e. the Social Welfare Centre at the Town and Commune Office was named by only 3.2% of the surveyed, although 35.5% benefited from the services it provides. In this context, it is not surprising that the assistance offered by this institution was negatively rated by the surveyed residents: not even one person gave it a good rating. Apart from local institutions, we also verified the activities of supra-local institutions. The results show that no person indicated that institutions at the level of the county, the region or the state care for their plight or the plight of their families and only 3.2% of the surveyed ever benefited from the assistance offered by these institutions. Similar to the Social Welfare Centre, none of the listed institutions was assessed positively by the respondents. Foundations were evaluated in the same way – none of the respondents benefited from help offered from a foundation or said that any foundation truly cares about their plight of the plight of their family. Therefore, no one gave the actions of foundations a positive rating. The school did slightly better as compared to the abovementioned institutions. Although only 3.2% of the respondents answered that the school really cares about their plight and the same number benefited from the assistance offered by the school, as many as 10.0% is of the opinion that the school's actions may receive a positive rating. On the other hand, 3.2% of the surveyed residents benefited from the help of the church and 6.7% even praised its actions in the field of assistance provided, but no one declared that the church truly cares about their plight and the living conditions of their family (Table 2).

The chapter concerning the characteristic features of problems indicated that the economic situation of the residents is dramatic, so it is impossible that they do not benefit from any forms of external assistance. As most of them stated that they do not benefit from institutionalised forms of assistance, we tried to discover what forms of non-institutionalised assistance they used. During the research we demonstrated that the family was the most important assistance provider for the residents of Jackowo. As many as 77.4% of the respondents claimed that it is the

Table 2. Structure of answers from the questionnaire survey regarding the assessment of assistance offered to the residents of post-PGR estate.

Answer	% of respondents
A. Who really cares about the plight and the living conditions of the family? (multiple answers possible)	
Institutions at the poviat level	0.0
Institutions at the voivodship level	0.0
Institutions at the state level	0.0
Foundations	0.0
The Social Welfare Centre at the Town and Commune Office	3.2
Schools	3.2
Church	3.2
Family	77.4
Neighbours	12.9
Residents of the estate	6.5
Residents of nearby villages	3.2

Source: questionnaire survey.

family that really cares about their plight and 56.7% rated help from the family well. A complementary but far less significant role in the scope of assistance provided (as compared to the family) is played by: neighbours (as many as 12.9% of the respondents stated that they care about their plight, and 10.0% gave their assistance a positive rating), residents of the estate (6.5% and 3.3%, respectively), residents of nearby villages (often related with the respondents; 3.2% and 10.0%, respectively) (Table 2).

The situation we present above gives us a view of assistance which is inadequate for the needs of the post-PGR estate's residents. Instead of a number of institutions which should focus their actions heavily on the problem estates, i.e. post-PGR estates, their role (due to the indicated ineffectiveness these actions) was taken over by the family, neighbours, and to a much lesser extent – the residents of the estate (this is particularly interesting in view of the lack of social bonds reported in the estate) and nearby villages.

## Discussion

The research regarding post-PGR estates that we have conducted comes within a general image and perception of rural areas. As Woodward (1996: 63) states, "*famine and misery are the features of the village*". This belief results to a large extent from the fact that globally still as many as 3/4

of the population (Tickamyer 2009) described as 'poor' live in the so-called 'rural regions'. The post-PGR estate which we have analysed undoubtedly fits into this model due to its problems in the economic, social and infrastructural dimensions.

What is more, the manner in which the policy aimed to assist such estates (*de jure* rural, as we have demonstrated above) is implemented is characterised by significant limitations, which does not lead to the improvement of their current situation. Maybe these limitations result from the belief of the policy makers that rural areas and rural inhabitants in particular are often stigmatised as 'backward', 'inefficient', bearers of 'bad' social capital, and offensively described as socially 'redundant' (Pasięka 2012). The change in the policy makers' way of thinking should encompass at least two elements. The first one consists in noticing the potential of people regarded as 'the rural poor'. Tickamyer (2009) indicates that the rural poor are not only the reservoir of misery and deprivation, but they also form a link between the problems of rural and urban centres and developing and developed regions.

The second element relates directly to the approach proposed by Halfacree (discussed in chapter 2) who believes that in order to have a realistic chance to solve the socio-economic problems in rural areas we should primarily confront the needs and expectations of the people with the implementation of an efficient policy. As pointed out by Cloke (1993), if there are no clear-cut problems then there is no political need for a policy response. In turn, problems may be articulated only by the residents of rural areas themselves, at the level of lay discourses. If we try to proceed this way, solutions regarding post-PGR estates should be preceded by a diagnosis of the conditions prepared on the basis of remarks and opinions of their residents, as only an in-depth analysis of the situation of individual estates on the local scale will allow policy makers to estimate the scale of problems and propose adequate solutions on a larger scale, e.g. regional or national. Such procedure is strictly related to the concept of rurality in which both the rural area and its problems are defined through lay discourses and only then confronted with policy discourses. If solutions are proposed top-down (without taking into consideration the opinions of people

subject to that policy) with a presupposition that all rural areas are alike, just as are all post-PGR estates, they will not bring satisfactory results. Actions of this kind are responsible for the fact that for over a quarter-century Poland and other countries in East-Central Europe have not found a remedy for the complex socio-economic problems observed in post-PGR estates.

In the context of the study, another very disturbing fact is the negative rating of institutionalised assistance forms by the estate's residents. This means that the offer of public institutions at different levels does not match the expectations of their potential clients. In this case it is similar: if these institutions based their actions on the diagnosis of the residents' needs and thus redefined the scope of the assistance provided, their offer would definitely be far more attractive and the assistance provided more effective. Instead, their role, to a very limited extent due to capabilities, is played primarily by the family. As Kay (2012) suggests, the relationship between formal structures and informal sources of assistance is shaped by experiences of both socialist state provision and the post-socialist transformation. This statement refers also to the residents of post-PGR estates, who in the past were used to the PGR catering for their needs. Once they were cut off from this easily-accessible assistance during the transformation period, they have been finding it difficult to cope with the new reality. Thus, if institutions established by the state in order to help the needy do not address residents affected by the syndrome of learned helplessness who more often choose to marginalise their needs over trying to change anything in their lives, the way of thinking and acting of the latter, formed in the previous system, will not undergo change. Moreover, the solutions proposed by the state will be inefficient also in future years, leading to further multifaceted degradation of these estates and the deterioration of living conditions of their residents.

As noted by Pasięka (2012), any negative phenomenon in present-day Poland is explained with reference to 'the communist heritage' and 'communist mentality'. However, if the proposed solutions for the PGR estates that formed during the socialist period and were the flagship projects implemented in rural areas at that time, focused more on the present and the future, and less on

the past, the situation could change dramatically. It is also crucial that the policy discourses regarding rural areas are not the only sets of guidelines giving grounds to the implemented policy. Here, we see a substantial role to be played by scientific research conducted in line with the current discourse. However, the key role in determining the priorities of the policy addressed to rural areas should be played by the residents themselves, as they can best define their needs and expectations. In the meantime, the ambiguity and diversity of rural people are often missed. If a policy, understood as a set of solutions aimed to help primarily all incoherent and chaotic areas (post-PGR estates being clearly among them) is not to fail, it should consider all discourses and attach special importance to lay discourse, strongly articulated in the concept of rurality.

## Final reflection

In conclusion, it should be noted that as the results of different studies show (Psyk-Piotrowska 1996, 1998; Tarkowska 2001; Karwacki 2002; Borowski 2013; Biegańska et al. 2014a, b, 2016, 2018; Feltynowski et al. 2016; Krzysztofik et al. 2017b; Biegańska 2018; Dymitrow et al. 2018), in the new post-socialist reality the post-PGR estates are areas which deal with worsening socio-economic and material problems. What is more, the potential opportunities to obtain assistance are limited, and the existing solutions, in light of the residents' opinions and the analysis of objective effects, are not satisfactory. What results from this situation is the need to introduce solutions differing from the existing ones. Therefore, in this paper we have proposed a new approach, wherein we deem it pivotal to start from the concept of rurality, which is an essential theoretical basis for designing the foundations of a new policy regarding this type of areas.

In accordance with this approach, we need a change in the policy-makers' way of thinking which would aim to:

- notice and efficiently develop the potential of residents (primarily through including them in the process of change);
- build a policy on the basis of appropriately (bottom-up) identified problems by including residents in the phase of diagnosing needs;



however, the expectations, thus determined, will necessitate an expert translation into detailed assistance instruments coherent with the policy regarding these areas, which is to be designed in the same manner; and

- depart from the traditional manner of designing policies with a strong emphasis placed on the formal status of a settlement, which unfortunately often provokes a false perception of reality.

Such an approach seems legitimate as it is justified by the latest research concepts, and it includes both the residents and the policy makers in the creation of a rural policy. Will such an approach bring the expected results? It is hard to make such an assessment just now, but having in mind the inefficiency of the existing solutions, there is every reason to try.

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