

Aleksander Lewczuk, Zbigniew Brodziński

Agricultural Advisory in European Research Programme on Conditions and Quality of Rural Family Life

In 1990 the Department of Sociology of Nicolaus Copernicus University, using Scientific Research Committee financial support, started the realization of the Polish part of international research 'Quality and standards of rural family life'. (The international research being conducted in Germany by the Institute of Structural Research at the Federal Centre for Agricultural Research Braunschweig, in Czech by the Institute of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology Prague, and in Austria by the Federal Institute of Agricultural Economics). Their purpose was:

- 1) The working out and elaboration of precise, objective and comparable ways (tools) of measurement of the conditions and quality of villagers lives.
- 2) Conducting empirical and comparative research, whose goal was the gathering and working out of material, enabling the analysis of similarities and differences in the conditions and quality of rural family life in various European countries.

On the areas of Poland, Germany, Czechia and Austria from 1990 to 1992 empirical research was conducted for the purposes of: practical verification of research procedures, proposed by Polish and German scholars, and the gathering of materials enabling the comparison of quality and conditions of rural family life in the countries taking part in the first phase of the project.

From obtained materials — presented and debated at international research conferences in Bonn (13th–20th June 1993) and in Gdańsk (7th–12th March 1994) — the result of which univocally ensued that the main challenge standing before European countries and their agricultural policy was the creation of many and possibly various work places for agricultural family members. Already, nowadays most of them, regardless of the acreage of their farms, must look for additional sources of income either on their own farms (processing and selling of agricultural produce, tourism services or art and handicraft) or outside their farms (in small rural industries, craft or other services).

For the purposes of conducting closer research analysis of this phenomenon the participants of both conferences decided to appoint a coordination team comprising T. Cecora (Germany), T.M. Garcia-Alvarez-Couque (Portugal), A. Kaleta (Poland), V. Golikowa (Russia), M. Marini (Italy), whose task was to prepare a pan-European research project about the economic activities of rural families. At its first meeting (Toruń, 11th-13th October 1994) they formulated their general assumptions and indicated that their goal would be to recognize social economic and social cultural factors which stimulate or reduce the economical activity of modern rural families; their other goal being to formulate possible institutional and non institutional activities, which create new economical activational forces among rural inhabitants.

Identifying new forms of rural families economical activities seems to have particular significance in the case of Poland. For Poland is characterized not only by a particularly high, compared with other European countries, percentage of people working in agriculture and living in the countryside, but also by significant advancement in transformational processes taken place in the social economic system, which requires — amongst others — reorientation of the rural economic base. On the results of research into country revitalization done by the Department of Sociology at Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń, more and more often it is being stated, that Polish economic prosperity should be connected with the development of small, agrarian food processing enterprises, using first of all the potential of family farms and ecologically friendly technologies. It seems that the introduction of the social economic model of rural economic development is most agreeable with the social interests of the country, which the consistent implementation of the farm-market model means bankruptcy for several hundred thousand farms and the consequent necessity of looking for new forms of employment outside agriculture for around two million people. It should be the objective to create conditions in which many small farms, otherwise, sentenced to annihilations could prosper successfully as agrarian gardening multi-professional farms. Connecting the agricultural work (for example in ecological agriculture) with other forms of employment outside agriculture, but still in the area of one's place of living (for example agrotourism) would prevent mass unemployment. The origins of such activity can be found hitherto in the informal activity of countryside inhabitants. The Committee of Scientific Research having noticed the scientific and practical meaning of such research awarded in 1994, financial support to the Department of Sociology at Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń, for the project realization 'The Social Economical Activity of Rural Families in the Conditions of the System Transformation'. One of the main purposes of this research task, which is an integral part of the already characterized pan-European researches, will be the identification of the real and potential

role of the agricultural advisory institution, which is the most important institution supporting and promoting various forms of Polish rural families economical activities. The Polish agricultural advisory system comprises of a network of 49 Rural Advisory Centres (one in each voivodship). All of them have their own branches. They employ around 5 thousand specialists from various areas who, theoretically, can reach every farm, bringing to farmers and their families help in realizing and taking independent and sensible decisions of productional, economical and social character. This help is especially important in the present situation as the whole of the Polish economy transforms itself from a centrally managed to market system.

Generally talking, in Polish agriculture functioning before 1989 (the beginning of the transformation process connected with the implementation of the so called Balcerowicz plan):

- each produced raw material and agricultural product was sold in purchasing centres, which were created by the net of cooperatives and state processing enterprises and at the price regulated by the state
- some farmers were offered agricultural credit with low interest rates
- bad relations between Polish and the world's agricultural market existed, because these relations were controlled by the state, which regulated import and export prices.

Changing the functioning principles of agriculture — the giving up of food subsidies and preferential credits, the opening of agriculture to the world's market surprised farmers, who were not psychologically and economically prepared for the new conditions: for quickly rising interest rates, for difficulties in selling products, for the opening of the market to financially supported Western European products.

In this new situation the agricultural advisory system has got new and very difficult tasks, especially in the field of rebuilding rural families social consciousness, so as they can adapt their economic activity to free market principles. Efficiency of activities in this field depend on whether, in the nearest future, we will be able to work out scientifically based principles of efficient economic organizational advisory, especially in the area of connecting farms with the market (it seems necessary to create an agricultural market information system) and in the area of looking for additional sources of income by using the possibilities connected (especially in Poland) to pro-ecological directional policy in agricultural and countryside development.

From research done by the Department of Agricultural Advisory at the Technical Agricultural Academy, Olsztyn, ensue that, presently one of the most difficult area of advisory services in the countryside is education and consultancy aimed at the awakening of, the spirit of enterprise, among rural countryside inhabitants. The observed deterioration in the standard of living of the rural population, some farmers been unable to support themselves even on relatively large farms demands, most of all, the stimulation

of activities which identify and develop alternative sources of income, for example in the form of enterprises processing agricultural raw materials, agrotourism, commerce and services centres etc. Advisory centre influence should be directed to rural households, which have productional reserves and adaption abilities. In such households they not only decide about the ways of earning, but they also organize additional economic activity for the family members.

Important tasks, in that respect, women get, who greatly influence all those activities which serve to satisfy the needs of their own farms (vegetable, fruit and poultry production etc.) thus limiting the family expenses on so-called necessities.

Another important sphere of economic organizational advisory influence are rural cooperatives, which also under Polish conditions may be one of the factors improving living conditions, because of the possibilities of obtaining cheaper means of production services and the taking possession of so-called added value, for instance from food processing.

Present forms of cooperatives are dominated by administration and they more often represent the interest of their employees than members, they don't respond to new requirements, thus demanding reorganization. It requires not only the rebuilding of village inhabitants' consciousness, but also finding effective ways of introducing sensible methods of solving the productional and economic problems of rural societies which, for instance, could break the still dominating expectation of state help, attitude.

An unusual important dimension in the stimulation of enterprise in rural areas are advisory system influences which inform and introduce ecodevelopment principles, so important for Poland because of progressive degradation and pollution of the natural environment and architectural landscape. Of most importance is the finding of ways and means of convincing farmers to limit or totally give up certain farming methods on areas of natural value and areas protected by law. At the same time there should be proposed new, financially attractive forms of economic activity, for example eco-agriculture or other alternatives, that can provide means of survival such as eco-tourism, sanatorium treatment, natural treatment, raising of forest saplings, undergrowth cultivation art and handicraft, etc.

The process of the Polish market transformation causes and will cause many conflicts, not only in the organizational and economic spheres, but also in the psychological sphere. Many of these conflicts may be, as we think, avoided, if it can be managed to join research results from the fields of countryside sociology and agrarian economics with the scientific experiences of agricultural advisory and its services, which is strongly emphasized by the authors of the pan-European research program into the conditions of rural family life.