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## Contemporary Research of Social Problems in Agriculture and Rural Areas of the Czech Republic

The research of agriculture and rural areas is developed at various institutes in the Czech Republic. Main attention is focussed on the political, economic and social changes after 1989, likewise in other Central and East European countries.

The research stream may be divided into two principle categories: the first is targeted at the impact of privatisation and the transition process on employment as well as the working conditions of agricultural workers and the rural population. The second one concerns rural areas in a wider sense. It involves various changes in social structures, changes in life style and living conditions in villages.

The research is derived from national financial sources as well as international collaboration.

Only research studies which were finished in 1995 or continuing are mentioned in this paper.

### Research Institute of Agricultural Economics (RIAE)

This facility is located in two independent institutes — in Prague and Brno. The regional policy on the contemporary social problems of agricultural and rural population is included in their research brief.

Two research tasks concerning social problems were finished in RIAE — Prague during 1995. The first: *Entrepreneurial Climate in the Selected Villages of the Czech Republic* (conducted by Věra Trnková) was done as a sociological research of 600 respondents living in villages with the worst living conditions. The criteria of selection were their position above sea level and the number of inhabitants (less than 2,000 people).

The results of the research confirm the hypothesis that the development of enterprise activity in these villages is strongly limited by the insufficient level of technical background. However, the interest of people who

have not yet undertaken any entrepreneurial activity was greater than expected by the research workers. This interest is aimed towards business and services. They frequently mentioned taking on two jobs (agriculture and agro-tourism, agriculture and forestry etc.).

The second research task: *Regional Policy in Agriculture* (conducted by Magdalena Hrabánková, collaborators, Jiří Němec, Cyrila Marková) discuss the regional policy for agriculture under the pressure of a market economic operating in the Czech Republic. The research includes the experience of domestic and foreign authors with regional policy and shows its common as well as specific relations.

The research *The Ways of Stabilisation of Rural Inhabitants in the Villages with the Highest Distress* (conducted by Věra Trnková, collaborators: Emil Svoboda, Miroslav Kraus, Františka Chaloupková, Karol Trostler) will continue in 1996.

Interviews, questionnaires and the gathering of vital statistical information was conducted in twenty selected villages from three districts — borderland district in the West frontier, borderland district in the East frontier and the interior district. Common features of the selected micro-regions were a lack of working places, higher rates of unemployment, decline of transport means and migration from rural areas.

The results of the research show that different preconditions and limits for the security of village inhabitants exist inside these micro regions. Improvement of transport policy is the first priority in the small villages. The basic development and stimulating factor in the middle villages appears to be the creation of new jobs. Again and again, research confirms that the level of facilities in the village (shops, services etc.) is an important factor in stabilising the rural population.

Another continuing research project is: *Dynamics and Directions of Political, Social and Economical Changes in Europe: Comparative Study East-West*.

This project is managed and financed by the Committee of economic and social research EU as an international collaboration. The research is based on the comparison of four countries: Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary (co-ordinator Nigel Swain, University of Liverpool). The Czech Republic part of the research is conducted by RIAE (Věra Trnková, Cyrila Marková) with CZU collaboration from (Helena Hudečková, Michal Lošťák). The project has two phases. The first: *The Transition from Collective to Family Farming in the Post-Socialist Central Europe* began in 1992. The second: *Rural Employment and Rural Regeneration* began in 1993 and is still continuing.

The research was conducted in 1,000 households of selected villages from regions by questionnaire. There is uniform criteria for all participating

countries. The aim of the project is to obtain information about the background of changes during the transition period in these countries and their differences. The main investigated factors are the employment in rural areas and changes which take place or are expected to in the legislation, economic and political conditions of rural areas.

Collaboration in this project was offered by the Czech Agricultural University, Prague. They used various methods of research. One was documentary research — government documents, community records, local chronicles. The second were interviews (non-standardised) with key people in community life. Both of these methods were accompanied by field work. Nine Czech and Moravian villages were investigated in the research, with the focus on their development before World War II, during social history and on contemporary events in the sphere of economy (both agricultural and non-agricultural), politics and the socio-cultural area.

The research has not yet been completed. This phase of the research, where the contract collaborators from RIAE are engaged) provides in depth information about the future possibilities of village development with attention on farming. The collected material will provide a wide range of information about processes in rural areas and could be used on a wider basis than that already indicated.

### **Research Institute of Agricultural Economics (RIAE) Brno**

The above is engaged in many research tasks. *The Signs of Changes in the Social Situation of Agricultural Workers* (Hana Horská, Daniela Spěšná) was concluded in 1995. This study shows the changes which influence the work and living conditions of the agricultural and rural population connected with the transformation of Czech agriculture.

The project *Social Preconditions of Sustainable Development in Agriculture — Social Strategy of Agrar Policy* (H. Horská, D. Spěšná, J. Bartoš, J. Drlik) continues in 1996. The socio-economic status of agricultural workers are researched in this study.

The sample includes 786 economically active people from various agricultural enterprises in the Czech Republic. Questionnaire and standardised interviews were used for data collection.

The aim of the survey was to discover the factors and differences connected with the transition of the economy, ownership and enterprise in agriculture and which could fundamentally change the social status of agricultural workers. Its conclusions indicate changes in the structure of ownership and enterprise in agriculture and differences between various status groups of agricultural workers — in accordance with education, socio-professional status, income and possession level, income in kind, the living standards of the family etc.

The analysis of development of socio economic status was used to formulate the social goals and potential social risks in the models of agrarian policy. They are reflected in the context of affiliation of the Czech Republic to the European Union.

### **The Czech University of Agriculture, Prague,**

shared in a few research projects in 1995. As well as the above mentioned, two other projects were concluded:

*Transition in Central and Eastern Europe* was conducted from international resources. As well as the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania also took part. The project was co-ordinated by the University of Chiba (Tokyo, Japan) and aims to reflect the political, economic and social changes in Central and Eastern Europe. The historical method was used as the access. For the characteristics of current state development, questionnaire and interviews were used. The survey study *The Changes in the Small Czech Village after 1989* was made in the Czech Republic by Věra Majerová.

A small village near Prague was chosen for this survey. This was a prestige co-operative before 1989, which makes up the economic and social tiers of the village. Significant numbers of inhabitants underwent unemployment after the disintegration of the co-operatives. They sought new jobs or started their own businesses.

The conclusions of the survey show several interesting findings. The economic vacuum which appeared after the disintegration of the co-operative was filled. Unemployment did not cause serious distress, business activities were developed, and the proximity of the capital provided some job opportunities, alleviating the more striking problems. However, social trauma does persist, especially for those people who were connected with the former co-operative not only as a working place, but also for the social status.

The opinion concerning changes after 1989 is more markedly left wing in this village in comparison with the surveys conducted in other villages and other social groups of rural and agricultural population. The visible tension in human relations connected with the continuing transition was anticipated during the field research.

The research *Private Farmers — Newly Rising Social Group of the Czech Agricultural Workers* conducted by Věra Majerová from the Research Support Scheme of Central European University, was completed in 1995.

The data collection (Autumn 1994–January 1995) produced information on a national sample of 385 private farmers from 72 districts of the Czech Republic.

The social group of private farmers, seen as a sociological phenomenon, went through the most dramatic evolution, from majority (in pre-war time)

to a negligible small minority. This group was very close to total social and economic annihilation. Now this group is emerging into a higher social significance. Private farmers represent about 20% of people active in agriculture. However, slightly more than half of these farms is under one hectare. The remainder of the farms are differentiated by size, nevertheless, most common are farms under 50 ha. Less than 2% have more than 100ha.

The results of the survey drew attention to the specific profile of farmers social grouping as well as to the trends in today's farming.

Private farmers are mostly the offspring of farmers and so are their spouses. They have a narrow experience of life. The family experience plays an important role here. Most of them remember the period of collectivism either personally or through family history. This experience of injustice is deeply rooted in their hearts and minds.

Empirical studies reiterated that farmers are better qualified than the average agricultural population. Private enterprise is attracting these people who have sufficient boldness, determination and ability to overcome all the obstacles, handle all the administrative hurdles of privatisation with the wherewithall to gain loans, and the ability to organise an agricultural enterprise.

More than a half of farmers used to work in non-manual professions, mostly in agriculture, but some in other areas of the economy. A clear connection exists between the acreage and the education of a farmer. More educated farmers with managerial experience on large collective farms also have personal contacts.

Many factors form the entire process of the revival of private farming. The smaller farmers do not work all their land and lease it out to larger farms. The breaking point s in our sample at the level of 20ha. The dominating tendency is not to return to individual farming but to an optimal concentration of estates without the need to own the means of production. Larger enterprises rent rather than buy the land.

Private farmers differ from the majority of the agricultural population in their attitude to Czech society after 1989. The decision to be a farmer was not financially attractive. Furthermore, this profession does not hold high prestige. However, a majority declared that they would not wish to return to the situation before 1989. Most positive aspects were: reborn democracy, the possibility to enjoy one own abilities and knowledge, to gain from the same, possibility of foreign travel, independence, freedom of information and freedom to congregate.

In general, we can say that the farmer is touched by everything that is relevant a rapidly transforming agriculture and rural areas. Additionally, the farmers have specific economic and social characteristics which separate them from those who decided to be employees.

The project *Coping with Change in the Czech Republic (1994–1996)* was conducted in collaboration between American and Czech researchers: Joseph Hraba, Iowa State University, Ames (principle investigator), Frederick Lorenz (ISU), Zdeňka Pechačova, Jiří Hradecký, Czech University of Agriculture.

This project was initially funded from September 1993 to August 1996. The overall aim of the project was to conduct stress–distress research over three years on a panel of Czech households. The specific objectives were to:

1. Describe how society changes, with emphasis on inequality and how stressful life events are translated as they unfold over time.
2. Assess the relationship between stressful life events, family relationships, and the emotional, behavioural and physical health of individual family members.
3. Examine the mediating effects of physical, social and emotional resources on the relational between the experience of social change and well being.
4. Compare married and single adults, husbands and wives, in their experience of stress; their physical, emotional and behavioural responses to stress.
5. Compare the results of models applied to Czech families with similar models applied to populations in the United States and possibly other Eastern European countries.

Data from similar studies is available at Iowa State University.

The samples of respondents include 1090 wives and husbands and 158 single households. 79.8% of the respondents are aged from 19–55, 13.7% from 56–84 years; 50% is urban population.

Some results are: *Inequality, stress and distress*. Analyses were completed on a two wave pilot study (1990–91) and two waves of collected data from 710 Czech households in 1994 and 1995. Much of our time during the first year of the project was directed towards completing the analyses of the pilot data. Although modest in scope, the pilot data allowed one to examine the reliability of proposed measures and publish findings that relate inequality to changes in distress and physical well being (Hraba, Lorenz, Lee & Pechačova 1995a; 1995b; 1995c; 1994a; 1994b, Lee, Hraba, Lorenz, Pechačova 1994; Lorenz, Hraba, Conger & Pechačova 1995; Pechačova & Hraba 1991, 1992; Pechačova, Hraba, Lorenz and Lee 1994a; 1994b; 1994c).

First, one paper was published on the relation between indicators of stratification, age, gender, household size, income, and marital status, on depressive symptoms and anxiety, mediated by both mastery and coping strategies (Hraba, Lorenz, Lee and Pechačova 1991b). Gender and education were predictive of depressive symptoms and anxiety, much as they

were in the United States, with mastery and economic coping strategies mediating between the other variables and distress symptoms.

Lorenz, Hraba, Conger & Pechačova (1995) examined the effects of economic hardship on change in physical health and depressive symptoms using both waves of pilot data. Income, change in income and unstable work histories in the first year of the study predicted adjustments in consumption patterns between the first and second years, which, in turn, predicted changes in both health and distress. In addition, this paper compared married Czech and Iowa women. Reports of economic strain were more sensitive to actual economic conditions for Iowa women, while education had a more central role in reducing levels of distress for Czech women.

Pechačova, Hraba, Hradecký, Lorenz (1995) have not found significant differences in distress symptoms between urban and rural inhabitants as they expected in view of the fact that the transfer to a market economy has put heavy pressure on agriculture to adapt, in terms of size, structure and performance to the new economic conditions and market possibilities.

The research team have submitted this proposal for continuation in the future.

#### **Institute of Sociology Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic — Prague**

does not carry out specific research concerning rural areas at present. However, attention is given to local communities. Project: *The Political Culture of Local Communities* (principle researcher Zdenka Vajdová) has a main goal to investigate the local political culture in the broadest meaning of the term, as well as local political participation, and the community structure in three Bohemian towns. Special attention is given to the social and political factors determining the nature of political processes and the citizens participation at the local level. The results are expected to contribute to the theoretical concept of local social and political processes.

**Institute of Sociology Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic,** the detached scientific team in the town Usti nad Labem (North Bohemia) focused on the project Czech border regions in the processes of European Integration (conducted by František Zich, collaborators Václav Houžvička, Quido Kastner, Milan Jeřábek), the transformation processes and their impact on the social system, social structure and behaviour of the population living in the border region. It monitors major social changes and their context initiated by domestic changes in the Czech Republic as well as the impact of activity by immediate foreign neighbours. The attention is concentrated on the Czech side within the border along Czech/German frontiers. This is an extensive and extremely differentiated area with a population of about 1,000,000. Its social system was strongly affected

by post-war population changes and gradual assimilation of mostly new Czech immigrants. The transfer of German population from this region after World War II is being revived in the new geopolitical circumstances as a national issue and is becoming a source of tension.

The key research is focused on the following themes:

— changes in the social structure of the population living in border regions;

— reconstruction of civic society structures in the border regions and gradual formation of its cross-border dimension.

— Czech/German attitude and relations.

Given the complex nature of the development changes in the Czech/German border regions and their social and political relevance a new grant-aid project is being suggested entitled: *Formation of Cross Border Community* which will follow up on the knowledge gained.

The research project focused on the *Development of Settlement Structure and its Changes in the Countryside* (principle researcher, Radim Perlin) continues in **The Faculty of Nature Sciences of Charles University, Department of Social Geography and Regional Development — Prague**. The research is part of a broader research programme of Charles University, which searches after socio-economic development in the Czech Republic and its geographical selection. The survey is targeted to the development of a number of inhabitants and number of houses in the years of modern statistical statement 1869–1991. The survey starts from the administrative structure of communities from 1991. The results of the survey is typical of Czech districts. Maximum 5–6 types in accordance with the development of the number of rural inhabitants is differentiated. The various types are demonstrated in the graphic description on the map.

The extent of Czech research on agriculture and rural areas is always limited by various factors including economic ones. However, these topics are growing in importance in connection with the admission of the Czech Republic to international structures. The description, the understanding and explanation of social phenomenon as well as social processes continues as a pressing task for research workers next time.