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Research Needs for Rural Development in Central and Eastern Europe

The Need for Rural Development Research

Institutional transformations in Central and Eastern Europe are affecting rural people, economies and communities throughout the region. These changes are enhancing opportunities for some persons and areas, and reducing the quality of life for others. While an abundance of social science research has been conducted to better understand this process of social and economic transformation at the national level (Elster et al., 1999), little systematic research has sought to investigate whether the economic security and social well being of persons living in rural vs. urban places has been differentially affected. Aside from the general recognition that the transformation from state socialism has disadvantaged rural persons relatively more than their urban counterparts (Toth, 1999), we know very little about how macro-level processes such as the transformation from state socialism affect the economic security and social well-being of persons living in different settlement types. Moreover, we have little or no comparative analysis about how the transformation is affecting rural people and communities in different Central and Eastern European nations.

These questions are important for rural policy formulation because:

(a) The assumption that national level trends and changes are the same throughout a nation may produce 'one size fits all' type policies that may not be equally effective or appropriate in both urban and rural environments, and in fact may have beneficial impacts in some areas but deleterious impacts in others.

(b) While the region's nations have different histories (Swain and Swain, 1998), cultures, and institutions, and did not enter the post-socialist period in precisely the same situation, there is general recognition that all of the region's nations have had many common experiences during post-socialism. Hence, a comparative understanding of commonalties and differences in post-

socialist experiences within the region may contribute to more informed rural development policies based on the diversity of national conditions.

Hence comparative research on the determinants and consequences of rural community change can contribute to more informed public and private decisions, to shaping the agenda for public discussion of rural issues, and to providing a basis for designing, managing, and implementing rural development policies.

The Cornell-CEE Initiative

Cornell University and several Central European counterparts (August Cieszkowski Agricultural University in Poznań, Poland, Warsaw Agricultural University, the Slovak Agricultural University in Nitra, Slovakia, and Saint Istvan University in Gödöllő, Hungary) are engaged in a collaborative venture to enhance university-based research and education on agriculture and rural development in the region. This collaboration began in May, 1998 when Cornell and the August Cieszkowski University convened a planning workshop in Sielinko, Poland to initiate international and multidisciplinary dialogue in the broad area of agriculture and rural development, and to solidify such a dialogue into ongoing scholarly cooperation. The workshop, which involved 50 scientists from the region and the U.S., was organized around five substantive areas: (a) rural development, (b) market economics, (c) food safety and quality, (d) environmental management, and (e) biotechnology.

Participants in each of the five substantive areas were challenged to move their respective agendas forward. The rural development specialists held a follow-up meeting to the Sielinko workshop in Nitra, Slovakia in November, 1998. Twenty-two social scientists met for two days to discuss how to enhance research and education on rural people and communities in post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe. The participants concluded that a research network would facilitate multi-disciplinary and multi-national comparative research on high priority rural development issues. To initiate a process leading to the establishment of a research network, the participants recommended that an 'experts conference' be held in 1999 to review the state of knowledge about rural social and economic change in the region, and to identify the most important needs for future policy-related research. The participants recognized that social and economic development of rural areas are mutually interrelated processes, and hence the conference should focus equal attention on (a) the changing structures of rural economies, and (b) human and community development. Mieczysław Adamowicz (Warsaw Agricultural University), Ana Bandlerová (Slovak Agricultural University), David Brown (Cornell University), László Kulcsár (St. Istvan University), and Kai Schafft (Cornell University) were asked to plan the

conference programme, invite the speakers, secure funding, manage local arrangements, and produce a proceedings volume. This article describes the resulting conference and reviews the participants' recommendations about the direction and content of future rural development research in the region.

The Conference's Goals and Objectives

Sixty social scientists and rural development practitioners from 12 nations met at the Hotel Permon in Podbanske, Slovakia during 6–9 December, 1999 to engage in discussions about rural development research in Central and Eastern Europe. Major funding for the conference was secured from The Farm Foundation in Oak Brook Illinois, USA. Additional funding was obtained from The Open Society Foundation, The Economic Research Service-USDA, The Cooperative States Research Education and Extension Service-USDA, The Slovak Agricultural University in Nitra, and the Cornell University Central and Eastern European Programme. *The conference's overall goal was to improve the quality of public and private decisions on rural development by mobilizing researchers, and shaping the research agenda on the basic forces producing institutional and organizational changes in rural communities in Central and Eastern Europe.* Specific objectives were to:

- (a) Review the state of knowledge about rural development in the region.
- (b) Develop an agenda of the highest priority issues for future policy-related rural development research, and
- (c) Establish a Central and Eastern European rural development research network that will serve as a 'platform' for future collaborative activities thereby increasing the productivity of individual efforts through synergistic cooperation.

Conference Organization and Process

The conference programme was comprised of plenary addresses on broad themes of social and economic transformation in Central and Eastern Europe, and concurrent sessions that focused on more specific aspects of rural development.¹ The plenary sessions provided an overall context for the more targeted discussions of rural development. Each of the concurrent sessions included two papers and a reactor. The authors were instructed to provide

¹ These themes were covered: Population and Human Resources; Resources Contributing to Rural Development; Rural Economic Restructuring; Rural Families and Households; Managing the Rural Environment; Social Inequality in Rural Regions; Technology and Infrastructure as Contributors to Rural Development; Institutional Restructuring and Rural Development; Governance and Community Development.

a synthesis of social science research in their particular subject matter, e.g., population and human resources, economic restructuring, institutional change, rural development policy, etc., and to identify gaps in present knowledge, under-researched issues, and/or issues on which there is substantial disagreement among scholars. The reactor's role was to discuss the two papers and to help distill out the most important issues for future research. Reactors were especially important in the process of developing a research agenda because they were responsible for summarizing their sessions' highest priority topics in a plenary session at the end of the conference. These issues, gleaned from the plenary and concurrent sessions, were then merged into an overall research agenda during the conference's final plenary session. All of the papers presented at the conference are included in a proceedings volume that will be published in the summer of 2000 by the Slovak Agricultural University. The volume also includes the research issues identified by the reactors in each of the plenary and concurrent sessions, and the overall research agenda produced in the conference's plenary session.

Conference Participants

Rural development is an intrinsically multidisciplinary topic, hence a diverse group of economists, agricultural economists, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, geographers, and agrarian lawyers actively involved in rural and agriculturally-oriented research on the region was invited to participate in the conference. A number of rural development practitioners and policy makers was also invited so that the researchers' deliberations were grounded with respect to the opportunities and challenges being faced by rural people and communities, and the knowledge needed to produce more informed rural policy.

As stated earlier, we were guided by the principle that a comparative societal perspective will yield the most robust understanding of how the transformation from state socialism is affecting rural people, economies and communities in the region. Hence, the conference's participants were broadly international, coming from Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, several other Central and Eastern European nations, the U.S., England, Germany, the Netherlands, France and Italy. This comparative perspective permits individual nations to compare their own situations with those of their neighbours, and it contributes to a more fundamental understanding of the process of societal transformation and how such fundamental change affects peripheral areas and economies.

The Research Agenda

The conference took a broad view of rural development. The substantive framework that shaped the discussions involved five interdependent domains

of social, economic and political forces operating at the local level in rural environments: (a) population, (b) economy, (c) institutions, (d) resources, and (e) civil society. We considered each of these domains as aspects of local society, and we discussed how each was affected by the national and global environments in which they are embedded. Figure 1 presents a diagram of the substantive framework that shaped the conference. The national and global macro environments affecting, and affected by, rural society were discussed in the two plenary sessions that opened the conference. Particular aspects of rural population, economy, institutions, resources, and civil society were discussed in the concurrent sessions.

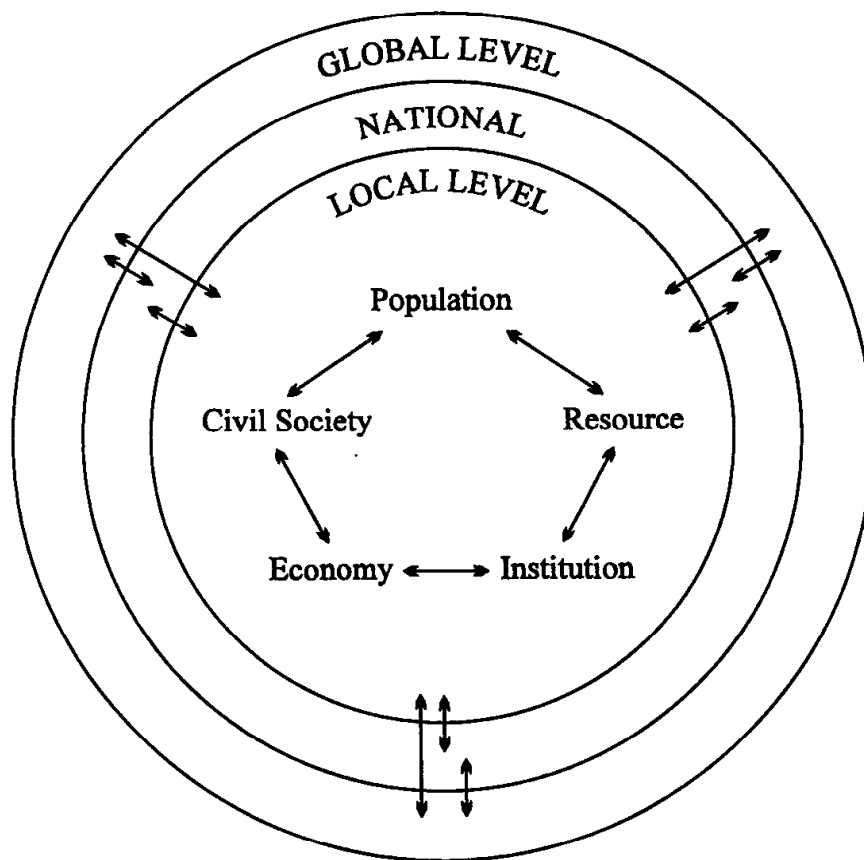


Figure 1. The embedded locality

One of the conference's goals was to develop an agenda of needed research to support rural policy. The conference participants met in a plenary session on the last morning to accomplish this task. Each participant was supplied with a list of the high priority research topics identified in the plenary and concurrent sessions. The participants arranged themselves into five groups (population, economy, resources, institutions, and civil society) to identify the most important research issues that emerged from the previous two days of presentations and discussion. Their conclusions are presented in the next section.

Population

- Changes in the demographic structure and socio-economic differentiation of rural families and households, including gender relations, fertility decision making, and the situation of rural children and elders.
- Determinants and consequences of changes in population dynamics and resulting population trends for rural development. Includes analysis of the interrelationships of demographic trends and social, economic and political changes and structures in rural society.
- Future directions of rural-urban migration and population redistribution, and the implications of such migration for rural (and urban) society.
- Trends and changes in the structure and utilization of the rural labour force.
- The impact of rural-urban differentiation in education and qualifications on rural development.

Rural economy

- The organization and design of basic economic institutions including concentration-deconcentration, capacity and capability.
- The household as a basic economic institution, and contributor to rural economic development.
- Restructuring the rural economic base including attention to resource stocks and flows, provision of public services and infrastructure, regional and rural-urban cooperative arrangements, etc.
- Social and economic consequences of land ownership and use patterns, and the mobility between uses and ownership.
- The interrelationships between and tradeoffs among policy objectives including: efficiency, equity, sustainability, quality of life, resource utilization, and environmental protection.
- The impacts of multi-national organizations such as the WTO and EU on regional and rural economies.
- The changing nature of the firm: entrepreneurship and changing ownership structures, capacity of local business to respond to economic signals, distinctive characteristics of rural firms including farms.
- The organization and performance of rural labour markets.

Civil society

- Methodologies to assist EU involvement in rural areas (e.g., through SAPARD).
- The impact of rural civil institutions, such as cooperatives, on rural community and economic development.
- The manner in which informal as well as formal institutions contribute to building and strengthening civil society (including public participation, voluntary organizations, civic associations).

- The ways in which civil institutions function as survival strategies, incubators for local economic development, etc.
- The role of civil institutions in sustaining rural areas as places to reside and make a living.

Resources

- The human and social factors that enable and constrain the sustainable (environmentally sensitive and socially just) use of natural resources.
- The influence of science and technological innovation on the transformation of rural areas.
- Development and management strategies for prioritizing goals of resource use.
- The effects of global processes and policies on local resource use and protection.
- The development of land markets.
- Management and financial tools and structures for managing human and natural resources.
- Changing perspectives on resource categories (increasing importance of knowledge, technology, information, organization, and milieu).

Institutions

- Changes in institutional systems, factors, structures, and trends associated with market transformation, integration to EU, globalization.
- Relationships between informal and formal institutions.
- The organization and performance of local government organizations as facilitators (or inhibitors) of community and economic development.
- Access to public goods (redefining relationships between state, market, family, and individual).
- The effects of institutional changes for efficiency, equity, and environmental protection.

Crosscutting considerations that are critical for research in all five areas were as follows:

- Developing databases that are comparable over time and geography, longitudinal, and accessible to the public at a low cost with public use software.
- Understanding that the current situation is affected by historical structures.
- Making effective links between real life rural development issues and the research questions investigated by academic researchers. Enhancing the linkage between research and the policy formation process.
- Breaking down the conventional barriers between methodological techniques and disciplinary perspectives.

- Seeking ways to understand the interrelationships between the local rural situation and the national and global context in which locality is embedded. Enhancing understanding of the interrelationships between the five substantive domains of local structure: population, institutions, resources, economy, and civil society.

A Network to facilitate Cooperative Research on Rural Development

Clearly, this ambitious agenda is beyond the capability of any single institution or discipline. Hence, the participants considered the prospects for forming a network to enhance their individual productivity and access to resources. This network would consist of a group of researchers who share the belief that the quality and effectiveness of policies for rural people, communities, and economies will be enhanced by high quality research on social, economic and demographic processes affecting rural regions of Central and Eastern Europe. To serve this function the network would be multidisciplinary, international, and must involve researchers, policy makers and administrators. The network would link a large population of individual researchers and development practitioners, but it would also connect small groups which focus their work on particular substantive issues of rural development such as local government, environmental management, family and household well being, gender relations, economic development, etc.

How might this network facilitate rural development research in the region?

- By maintaining ongoing communication among members.
- By sponsoring periodic research workshops on general or more specific issues.
- By providing seed money to encourage small groups of members to develop proposals for new collaborations.
- By producing and distributing working papers and other publications.
- By organizing opportunities to brief policy makers in respective countries about aspects of rural development.
- By providing travel funds to facilitate grant proposal writing, research planning, data base development, etc.
- By developing and managing rural development oriented databases.

These activities would require a substantial amount of 'core' funding and organizational effort. Organizational leadership would be needed to guide the network's activities, and resource allocations. A leadership secretariat elected by the membership is a possible way to direct the network's activities, serve as co-principal investigators on proposals for 'core' management funding, and allocate funds secured by the network. Staff support would also be needed to maintain the network, run the website and listserv,

take primary responsibility for organizing workshops and conferences, and editing, publishing, and distributing publications produced by network members.

Conference participants were enthusiastic about the prospects of forming a CEE Rural Development Research Network. The basic strategy agreed upon was to start slowly, obtaining initial funding to support one or two of the core network functions listed above. Other activities could be launched once the network has demonstrated its effectiveness and sustainability. As with any other 'community organization,' it is essential that norms of reciprocity be established early in the process so that network members both receive benefits but are also obligated to provide resources including time, talent, and information, etc. to the network through their active participation. The Slovak Agricultural University in Nitra agreed to develop a network web page to help to establish the rural development network. The search for a modest amount of funding to support core management of the network has started.

References

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