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**How can the Countryside be Helped?
A New Approach to the Development of Rural Areas
in Central and Eastern Europe**

Can problems generated by the current situation in the rural areas of Central and Eastern Europe be compared with the problems of South American countries, Japan or Canada? Is there a common discourse for problems emerging in such a broad geographic span? Is it possible to build a collection of mutual methodological and theoretical axioms, which would aspire to the role of a universal research model in rural sociology? Finally – is it possible to bring together issues concerning the rural areas of different continents without putting them under the one common denominator of European cultural heritage?

The problem of diversity experienced in different contexts, borders of alienation in a uniting Europe and a uniting world, the issue of our fundamental principles of behaviour towards one another, not necessarily on the political scene but in the human and moral dimension, the problem of closed academic circles, protecting previously elaborated theories, research results, innovative solutions – these are merely one side of the story. On the other, we see a need for contact with a different type of heritage, at micro level too, an opportunity for mutual cooperation between open-minded circles, the exchange of experiences (not as it used to be 'for us, but not from us').

The main assumption behind last year's Summer School, organised by the European Sociological Committee in Seddiner See near Berlin, was to bring the two contrasting sides face to face in order to put forward a requirement for starting inter-cultural dialogue. There was an atmosphere of mutual understanding and agreement throughout the Summer School. Whereas the watchword of the meeting dedicated to the modern development of rural areas was the conjunction of the concept of Contemporary Rural Development – the Issues of Nature, Gender and Community. 31 people attended the conference, including 6 lecturers: Prof. Dr. Friedhelm Streiffeler

(Humboldt University, Berlin), Dr. Karl Bruckmeier (Goteborg University, Sweden), Dr. Parto Teherani-Kroner (Humboldt University, Berlin), Prof. Dr. Hilary Tovey (President of the European Society for Rural Sociology, Ireland), Prof. Andrzej Kaleta (Toruń University, Poland), Dr. Bettina van Hoven (Groningen University, Netherlands); 22 students as well as 3 special guests.

There are essentially three watchwords freshly arranged, apparently borrowed from different areas. However, it so happens that such a combination is possible and is even widely applied in the sociological analysis of phenomena which are significant in the development of rural areas.

Despite the financial support for new development projects the future of the countryside (in the proposed arrangement of mutual links between nature, gender and local community) remains a mystery, seems practically unfeasible and would most readily be ignored. Hence the idea of reaching out for a new methodological model which may help researchers identify and interpret modern rural problems and perhaps even suggest a solution. It remains to be seen how this conceptual triad is reflected in social reality and how it can be referred to the guiding principles of the rural development strategy?

The Summer School organisers, attendees and guests tried to solve these and many other problems. Although a significant number of presentations should be taken into account, due to the specific subject matter of this publication, I shall concentrate on East and Central European matters.

The countryside in Eastern Bloc countries was registered into the structures of communist development models where the emphasis lay on the economic and social aspects of rural communities. An innovative approach to local development requires a critical approach to development models, applied during the system transformation process. A redefinition of concepts is required which formerly conformed to macro concepts yet did not reach the needs of specific communities.

Nature, as a concept rather frequently appears in modern rural sociology. It is inherent in the foundations of the concept of eco-development, ecological agriculture, the principle of respecting natural resources or ecological awareness.

The definition of gender with rather unclear connotations in sociological tradition, requires far closer attention. Without dwelling on detail, the term should create a new quality in interpersonal relations, conditioned by cultural and social features (the role theory). The research trend and analysis of gender have become a component of development projects and activities, yet the question of making the issue of gender a structural and integral part of the local community in the development of rural areas requires clarification.

The gender category allowed Summer School attendees to turn their attention to the very difficult situation for rural women.

Anita Silvana Izak Persuri from Croatia (Anita@iptpo.hr) presented the problem of rural women taking part in farm management. Research results showed that barely 1/3 of women are involved in making decisions concerning farm management, the cultivation or sale of land, purchase of machinery etc. The author of the research project sees an opportunity for rural women in local marketing, book-keeping, administration and agro-tourism. Running an agro-tourist farm will allow these women to produce evidence of their knowledge of regional cuisine, traditional handicraft, folklore and local customs, while developing this kind of skill may lead to the creation of a genuine regional product offered to tourists.

Unfortunately in the countries of Eastern Europe we still have problems evaluating women's work in farming from the economic point of view, hence an even greater need to calculate a fixed price concerning hitherto unpaid activities.

On the other hand, Zuzanna Fazekas (fzsuza@omega.kee.hr) discussed the existence of the initiative in support of women in the Hungarian countryside. A foundation was established with regional support for the organisation of training (weaving and needlework) for unemployed rural women. A tele-cottage was set up – a training and local tele-computing centre all in one. The tele-cottage model is familiar in the Polish countryside, fulfilling similar functions in the field of education, small rural enterprise (as a focal point for the production and sales of local produce), tourism, consulting and financial activity.

Nicoletta Ion from Romania, a representative of FEDRA (Romanian-German Association of Women for Rural Development – fedra@yahoo.com) discussed the project for the development of rural areas aimed at women looking for work in their own communities. The idea is about making use of apiculture in local industry and producing ecological, apitherapeutic cosmetics which are based on honey. Apiculture is not only a regional tradition. Due to it there are widespread ecological zones with a preserved natural bio-diversity and undisturbed eco-system. This is also an important area to be filled by future agro-tourism farm owners. Women would have a new occupation while being a living example of the new businesswoman.

Whereas Doina Tanase, another FEDRA representative, sees the solution to rural women's unemployment in sericulture which is part and parcel of local tradition.

Thus, the combination of the concept of gender and nature may involve matters which are not only significant for women but also, and above all, for the entire local community.

Let us take a look at contemporary development concepts which have become so necessary for the East European countryside.

Due to the discrepancy in the situation of European countries it is difficult to expect people to use standardised, unambiguous terminology, ap-

plied in the theoretical and empirical analysis of rural areas. Conference participants did, however, manage to present and discuss some theoretical aspects of changes taking place as well as new development paradigms.

The development programmes are addressed at the local community. These programmes are emerging at a time of growing rural crisis, manifested among others in a low standard of living, the escalation of poverty and unemployment, depopulation, weakening economy and advancing degradation of the natural environment.

These are problems any local community has to face. A condition for success is that community members must be involved in decisions affecting their local environment (this, after all, is their concern), which is something external specialists seem to forget, implementing solutions inadequate to the real needs and potential of specific local inhabitants. If we add the separation of projects from the natural development processes of a given area to the list of errors as well as burdening natural resources, what emerges is a need to demarcate new directions of rural development, and more precisely, new ideas regarding the reconstruction and reinforcement of the rural community after unsuccessful experiments concerning the modernisation of agriculture and rural areas. Whereas in the case of tendencies immediately linked with the agricultural economy, their main purpose is to erase the rift between rural and agricultural interests.

Lee-Ann Small (Great Britain) portrayed local factors influencing the agrarian reform implemented in post-communist countries along the lines of West European strategies. For her the transition from socialist agricultural structures to market oriented ones is fundamental for the development of rural economics in countries applying for entry into the European Union.

According to Small, research to date concerning agrarian transformation relied on macro-economic indicators while ignoring local issues. It is now time to look at the local measure of regulation of socio-economic processes. A way of getting agriculture out of the crisis is *sustainable development*. In order to appreciate the value of sustainable development, it is important to revive the wide range of traditional farming methods, taking local conditions into account. In difficult economic circumstances farm owners are offered the creation of companies and small businesses as a remedial measure which would bring life into the local economy as well as encourage the rural community to cooperate in favour of mutual interests and needs.

Hellena Nordstorm Kallstrom (Sweden) believes that every development initiative should be accompanied by three principles: cooperation, participation and multifunctionalism. Cooperation which is instilled in the local population, will contribute to the understanding between farmers and consumers and also to the creation of community spirit.

Participation is a question of making decisions concerning agricultural and rural issues. The bet here is on the engagement of farmers in the development process. This requires introducing a new political discourse as well as broadening the knowledge of agricultural policy. Multifunctionalism is to reduce economic risk, increase farmers' flexibility, encourage the reaching out for alternative sources of income. Multidirectional farming methods will differ from country to country, depending on specific conditions (resources, tradition, customs, natural environment).

The three above principles on how local communities function are to guarantee the successful implementation of development projects in rural areas, on condition that the local specificity has been considered.

To this list Marta Hollo (Hungary) adds 'openness towards new solutions to old problems,' i.e. an innovative approach. She believes that innovative actions are an opportunity for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe since attitude is more important than the project itself. The author of the report entitled 'Innovation and Adult Education in Hungary' sees a need to apply innovative solutions in activities favouring the shaping of local identity, competition (between agriculture and the rural environment) managing natural resources and adult education. She does, however, emphasise that innovative actions whose guiding principle are strictly social goals, cannot contribute to balanced development which after all depends on the combination of four functions: social, economic, ecological and cultural.

During the final discussion, despite the divergence in geographic position of represented countries, Summer School attendees showed remarkable convergence in their opinions concerning the future of rural areas. The majority see the opportunity for local communities in sustainable development which was attributed with the function uniting nature, gender and the local community into a coherent, specific entity.