

## INTRODUCTION

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It has been observed in contemporary geographical research that rural development is a multi-aspectual and multi-level process taking place at the local and the regional level. Its multi-aspectuality manifests itself in rural development being seen as accommodating not only economic growth in agriculture, but also changes of a social nature. Special emphasis is put on achieving a higher quality of life in rural areas through concern for the natural environment, cultural heritage, or preservation of the rural landscape. The multi-level development of rural areas is a result of interrelations among factors and processes occurring in various segments of society and at various levels of its organisation.

This volume of *Quaestiones Geographicae* presents nine articles taking up countryside-related problems. Their scope varies widely as to the subject matter tackled and the spatial range of study (local, regional and national).

The first group of articles deals with problems of agriculture. It opens with a contribution by Antonin Věžník, Hana Svobodová and Michael Král offering an analysis of spatial and structural changes in Czech agriculture over the years 2000–2010. On the basis of their research, the authors find that the Czech accession to the European Union has caused a decline in agricultural production and livestock breeding as well as a shrinkage of arable land, while on the other hand it has stimulated farmers to develop non-farming activities.

The next article is Roman Rudnicki's "Spatial differences in the number of applications for pay-

ments under the EU Common Agricultural Policy submitted by agricultural holdings in Poland over the years 2002–2010". The author makes an assessment of spatial differences in the EU assistance for Polish agriculture, especially from the CAP perspective. He concludes that the absorption of the Community funds has contributed little to a reduction of spatial disproportions in the development of Polish agriculture.

In her article "Methods employed in research on the spatial structure of agriculture", Anna Kołodziejczak presents methods used in studies of the spatial structure of agriculture. She discusses the notion of a spatial structure as well as the consequences and methodological assumptions that it entails. The issues discussed embrace statistical methods of studying the spatial structure of agriculture, those used to determine elements predominating in this structure and to describe its heterogeneity, as well as mathematical and spatial-econometric models applied in this type of research.

The problem of the diversification of farm incomes is tackled by Birte Nienaber and Irma Potočnik Slavič in their "Is diversification of farm households still an option for integrated rural development? Evidence from Slovenia and Saarland, Germany". On the basis of their studies the authors find that while the diversification of farm income contributes to a revival of rural areas, disproportions in their development still persist despite the absorption of RDP funds.

In their article "Farm families and future options – the role of the extension advisory service

in shaping Irish agriculture”, John McDonagh, Maura Farrell and Marie Mahon assess the significance of the agricultural advisory services in Ireland and determine the extent to which those services influence modern farming practices within the framework of the more traditional opinions of farmers.

The second group of articles addresses social problems of rural areas. Wioletta Kamińska analyses the relation between the education of the rural population and the level of economic development of the Polish countryside. She examines spatial differences in the level of education in terms of the core-periphery theory and finds that with the growing distance from an urban centre the level of education of the rural population decreases. The educational structure is least favourable in the peripheral areas of voivodeships.

The depopulation of the rural areas in Ukraine is the problem tackled by Aleksander Kuczabski and Tomasz Michalski. In the years 1992–2011, the demographic situation of the rural population worsened, especially in the central part of Ukraine. The authors establish that this is due to a drop in the number of births, restrictions on migration, and especially the processes of political and economic transformation taking place in Ukraine.

The third group contains two articles discussing changes in the land-use pattern in suburban zones in Poland. One, by Ewa Kacprzak and Barbara Maćkiewicz, deals with the process of taking

agricultural land out of production in the Poznań agglomeration in terms of changes in its land-use pattern. The pressure exerted by a large city determines non-agricultural forms of land use in areas situated in its neighbourhood. Among the most alarming consequences of urban sprawl onto the surrounding areas are a steady and irreversible shrinkage of farmland and conflicts resulting from a mix of functions performed by those areas.

The other article, by Benicjusz Głębocki and Robert Perdał, gives a spatial analysis of sale/purchase transactions in built and unbuilt plots of land and the land-use pattern in the suburban zone of Bydgoszcz over the years 2007–2010. The research problem is local, but the conclusions apply to many other suburban zones in Poland. They show land prices to depend on the location of a lot with respect to the city.

This volume devoted to rural development in the regions of Europe appears before the 34th Congress of the International Geographical Union, which is to be held in Cracow in 2014. It is my belief that it will be a significant contribution to this event, getting a wider spectrum of scholars interested in problems of agriculture and rural areas.

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Guest Editor

*Translated by Maria Kawińska*