
Study on the Level of Social Potential of Rural Areas on the Example of Selected Villages in Poland

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Abstract:

Purpose: The aim of the article is an attempt to examine the scale of social potential in rural areas on the example of selected villages in Poland. This potential is to build strong social capital, which is the basis for the development of local rural communities in Poland. Local communities, particularly those living in rural areas and bringing together small communities, face social problems. These include: declining social ties, ageing population, depopulation, lack of perspectives for the development of small towns - villages in particular.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The primary tool used during the research was a quantitative survey in the form of a multi-item questionnaire, also known as an omnibus. Due to the specific nature of the research subject, data was collected in the form of PAPI (Paper and Pencil Interview) with elements of face-to-face and in-depth interviews. The research covered three selected villages in the West Pomeranian Voivodeship in Poland, namely Różańsko, Barlinek and Chłopowo. A representative sample of 20% of the population was taken, and a total of 220 correctly and completely completed questionnaires were collected.

Findings: Rural local communities form a fairly large group in terms of Poland's area. This is due to the agricultural character of many areas of Poland. The observed problems in the form of increasing migration of young people to towns and cities, and at the same time an ageing population in rural areas, cause that rural areas, in particular villages, are affected by the problems of stagnation of development of such areas, lack of opportunities to take advantage of goods which can be regarded as basic, such as: modern road infrastructure, access to educational and cultural facilities. This brings with it a deepening problem of declining social ties, social exclusion and digital exclusion. Meanwhile, rural settlements harbour untapped social potential, which can contribute to changing and mitigating these social and economic phenomena.

Practical Implications: Appropriately collected data and its accurate analysis can contribute to the creation of effective strategies for the development of such settlements, the stimulation of social initiatives, the restoration of regional traditions and the creation of a strong local brand for the locality, its surroundings or the region.

Originality value: Based on the results of the research presented, a local development and action strategy is created for the villages involved in the research. The community and local authorities take part in this work by outlining future directions for changes in their villages and rural areas. In the opinion of the authors, the results of the research will become a contribution to building strong, enterprising rural communities that will be able to mitigate the socio-economic problems affecting the region in which they live. It is worth noting that

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this is the first study of this kind, which addresses the topic of the potential and social capital of Poland's rural areas in such a comprehensive manner in a regional aspect.

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JEL codes: *R11, R13, I 38.*

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1. Introduction

A determining factor for local development is the cooperation of local communities, which shapes the bonds between people, the trust they have in each other and the activity that results from them. The potential for joint action identified in this way creates social capital (Hryniewicz 2022). More specifically, the social capital analysed in the study conducted includes (Maczynska 2023):

1. contacts between residents of the surveyed villages and with residents outside their own villages,
2. loyalty to residents, which provides a sense of personal and general security,
3. trust in neighbours, the immediate environment, but also in the representatives of local institutions, e.g., school, kindergarten social organisations, local authorities (village mayor, municipal office) organisations and in strangers one meets,
4. local conflicts, which are the opposite of trust,
5. the inhabitants' attachment to their place of residence,
6. habits of involvement in common affairs (activity),
7. the existence or lack of relationships between local institutions and residents (cooperation),
8. belief that one's own initiatives and ideas can contribute to changing the situation in one's own village and the immediate environment (sense of influence),

The study of the social capital of the villagers understood in this way made it possible to get to know them and their characteristics, which can be an asset or a hindrance in activities for the development of each of the regions they represent.

2. Data and Methods

The authors used a survey method because of the ease of reaching a wide range of the study population, in which individual people use their own evaluation criteria in specific life situations. A research questionnaire was developed. Despite the related

subject matter of the analyses, due to the broad scope of the research, the research questionnaire took the form of an omnibus, i.e., a multi-topic survey. A particular advantage of this method is the possibility of combining questions from the scope of several potential questionnaires in a single survey.

In accordance with the methodology for such small communities, it was assumed to survey approximately one-fifth of the inhabitants (excluding children) of the surveyed villages. The assumptions made, taking into account the number of inhabitants of the surveyed villages and the results achieved in terms of the number of correctly completed questionnaires are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. *Projected and achieved number of surveyed units per village*

| Assumed minimum (1/5 of population of working and post-working age) | Results collected |
|--|--------------------------|
| Różańsko: 80 | 84 |
| Rychnów: 90 | 96 |
| Chłopowo: 40 | 40 |

Source: Own elaboration.

A total of 220, properly completed, complete questionnaires were returned, ensuring that the minimum sample size assumptions were met and that a low error rate was achieved.

A pilot study was conducted to assess how well the prepared questionnaire would be understood by the study group. After controlling for effects, a proper survey was conducted. The research was conducted between 24.05-27.06.2023.

The questionnaire consisted of 15 questions proper and 6 metric questions. Likert type scales, ordinal scales and nominal scales with semi-open questions giving the possibility to add one's own answer were used.

3. Results and Discussion

An important factor in the development of social capital is the frequency of residents' contacts. In the surveyed villages, daily contacts (not including household contacts) prevail, as they account for an average of 69.8% of external contacts. The highest frequency of daily contacts is characterised by the inhabitants of Różańsko.

The lowest share of daily contacts in total contacts is found in the village of Rychnów, as it amounts to 56.3%. Residents of Rychnów are more likely to have contacts once or several times a week (share 27.1%) compared to residents of Różańsko and Chłopowo.

If we take into account the total of daily contacts and once-more-than-a-week contacts, the situation evens out a bit, but still the inhabitants of Rychnowo are the least favourable (83.4%) compared to the inhabitants of Różanowo 91.7%).

The level of social capital, apart from the frequency of contacts, is influenced by the structure of the people contacted by the residents of Różanów, Chłopów and Rychnów. The survey made it possible to identify similarities and differences in terms of residence, acquaintances, their political and religious views, education and professional status, and age.

Analysis of the characteristics of the people contacted by the inhabitants of each village allows the following indications:

- The inhabitants of each village had the same level of contact with both people much older (58.13% on average) and younger than themselves (61.37% on average). The "hard to say" responses (from 8% in Chłopów to 13.5% in Rychnów) indicate that the inhabitants of Różanów, Chłopów and Rychnów do not know their interlocutors well or could not accurately assess whether they might be their age;
- The professional status of the interviewees' interviewees varies. This was indicated by 88% of respondents in Chłopów, 84.5% in Różanów and the least, 78.1% in Rychnów.
- The people contacted by the residents of the surveyed villages differ in their level of education. This was most often indicated by respondents in Różanów (82.1%) and least often by respondents in Rychnów (68.8%).
- The above summary shows that the inhabitants of Różanów are the most open to contacts, taking into account all the studied characteristics of these contacts and the people they have contacted. The least open are the inhabitants of Rychnów. The difference between Różanów and Rychnów is 12.47 percentage points.
- The third component examined, characterising the strength of the interconnectedness of the residents of Różanów, Chłopów and Rychnów (illustrating the strength and quality of contacts), was whether the respondents could count on help in various life situations from people outside their own families.

An analysis of the respondents' assessments in the individual villages regarding the possibility of receiving help from people outside their family allows the following conclusions:

- The inhabitants of each village rated highest and at almost the same level that they could get help with minor repairs, moving, etc., and with shopping if someone in the household was ill. Residents of Różanów are most optimistic in this regard, indicating 95.2% and 96.4% respectively. Those surveyed in Chłopów are slightly less optimistic, with yes responses of 93% in both cases. Respondents in Rychnów

rated their chances of getting help in these two life situations lowest. Their ratings are at 87.5% and 88.5%.

- High ratings were given to the possibility of getting help to keep an eye on the house/apartment while away. In Chłopów and Różańsk at 92%. In Rychnov the ratings were lowest at 68.8%.

- Respondents are very cautious about their ability to get help with finding a job and arranging an appointment with a good doctor. This is most evident among respondents in Rychnow, who indicated a 42.7% chance of getting help with finding a job and a 55.2% chance of getting help with arranging an appointment with a good doctor. Respondents from Różańsk assessed their opportunities the highest (57.1% and 60.7% respectively).

- The least opportunities are seen by respondents in obtaining a loan of a considerable amount of money.

The above summary shows that the inhabitants of Różańsk are the most optimistic about the possibility of obtaining the types of assistance assessed (at 75.1%). The inhabitants of Rychnow are the least optimistic (at 60.9%) about their chances. The difference between Różański and Rychnow is 14.2 percentage points.

The optimism of the residents of Różańsk and Chłopów is above the combined arithmetic average calculated for the three surveyed villages. Residents of Rychnow also had the greatest difficulty in answering yes or no, with 18.6% indicating a hard to say answer.

Residents of the surveyed villages, making up the local community, should engage in a variety of activities for the benefit of their village or municipality. This activity is an important component of social capital.

The ideal activity of the local community should manifest itself primarily in (Grzeda 2008):

1. readiness to cooperate and dialogue and to share information or resources;
2. creativity, involving a continual and creative search for new solutions and the taking of initiatives;
3. commitment and conviction to act for the common good and readiness to engage in and initiate such activities;
4. resourcefulness and the ability to organise oneself and solve one's own problems independently
5. readiness to learn from one's own and others' experiences, accompanied by in-depth reflection and a desire to improve; 6;
6. openness and attention to diversity, tolerance and equality of all members of the community;

7. safety;
8. solidarity.

In the above characterisation of social local activity, such a community of citizens in the village and municipality is considered active, which, in order to improve the quality of life of its inhabitants, manages its territory in a "conscious and responsible manner" (Jordan, 2013).

In practice, the activity of people belonging to a rural community, which is a component of its social capital, may take various forms and consist, among others, of:

- undertaking specific activities for the benefit of the village/commune (such as: joining voluntary work or the formation of local NGOs or other less formal groups and participating in their actions),
- a sense of belonging to the community,
- readiness to make investments (not only monetary) for the development of their village,
- the conviction that the village community is the property of all its members and that they are all responsible for it,
- engaging in cooperation with other members of the community to solve problems in the community,
- cooperation with local authorities (Grillo, Teixeira, Wilson 2010).

This section of the report will present a comparative analysis of the involvement of the residents of the surveyed villages in the different types of activities listed in the survey questionnaire.

An analysis of the ratings expressed by respondents in each village regarding the degree to which the people surveyed were informed (heard) about the activities being carried out and undertaken in the area, and their declaration of involvement in their implementation, allows the following conclusions to be drawn:

- Residents of each village rated their level of information at varying levels. Residents of Rychnowo assessed that they are best informed about cultural events (53.1% of indications). Residents of Różańsk indicated information about residents' initiatives to jointly build local infrastructure, e.g. a road, sewage system, school (56.0%) and information about neighbourhood cleaning campaigns, tree planting (50.0%). Residents of Chłopów also indicated neighbourhood cleaning actions, tree planting (40.0%) and village meetings (45.0%).

- In almost all surveyed aspects, the residents of Chłopów are the least informed.

- the level of declarations in terms of neighbourhood support is low, with the highest level declared by Rychnow residents 34.4% and the lowest (13.0%) by Chłopów residents. This level of declarations in terms of engaging in neighbourly assistance

conflicts with the expectations of respondents for assistance in their various life issues, presented in the previous subsection.

- A significant proportion of respondents (40.9% on average) do not attend village meetings. This indicates a significant withdrawal of respondents from the public sphere of their own village. Respondents strongly underestimate the importance of these meetings. They are not perceived as a place for the formation of local policy to effectively pursue the interests of residents. The lowest attendance (39.6%) at village meetings was declared by respondents from Rychnow.

The above comparison shows that the inhabitants of Różań are the most informed about the activities taking place in their village (31.1%) and the most willing to get involved in social activities (18.9%). The inhabitants of Rychnów assess their information about the mentioned activities the lowest (at the level of 22.8%).

The difference between Rychnów and Chłopów in terms of the assessment of the degree of information is 8.3 percentage points. At the same time, respondents from Rychnow declared their willingness to get involved in social activities at the lowest level (9.7%).

The calculated average for the three surveyed villages shows that 51.6% had not heard of the activities mentioned in the survey questionnaire and expressed a willingness to get involved at 14.7%. This indicates a low level of social activism among the residents of the three villages surveyed. 14.9% of respondents found it difficult to declare that they would undertake activities for their villages. Some justification for this attitude may be the low average level of information about the need for such assistance (45.2%).

When asked how the respondents assessed their village in terms of activity and social integration in relation to neighbouring villages, there was no clear opinion. A much better (60.2%) and better (22.6%) assessment of their village was given by respondents in Różańska. This is the best rating and is higher than the aggregate average ratings (29.8% and 24.5% respectively) of respondents.

The greatest pessimism characterises the respondents of Chłopów, as only they indicated a rating of much worse (10%) and the highest rating was also worse (27.5%). Through their ratings, the residents of Różansk were very positive about the direction of development of their village. In terms of social activity, there is a lot to be done in Chłopowo. It is an open field for increased activities.

Within the last area related to opinions about their village and life among their community, the respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with the statements about their environment.

Interpreting the results of the survey, the degree of identification of the respondents with the community of their own village should be rated very highly. They declare a very high attachment to their own villages. This attachment (indications of strongly agree and rather agree) is almost the same in all three surveyed villages and amounts to 75.0% or more.

Respondents were more critical of their expectation that their children should live in the same village in the future. Such an expectation was declared (indications of agree and rather agree) by respondents from Różansk at 39.3% and by respondents from Rychnow and Chłopów at 42.5% each.

The very positive assessment of residents' attachment to their village is confirmed by the low rates of their sense of isolation (feeling that they do not belong anywhere). More than 15% of respondents in all villages indicated that such a situation does not exist (responses of strongly disagree and rather disagree).

The high level of attachment to one's own village and belonging can be linked to inter-neighbourly trust in the surveyed villages. The statement that in my neighbourhood neighbour does not trust neighbour was confirmed at a similar level by the respondents in Rychnowo (55.2% of the responses to strongly agree and rather agree) and Chłopów - 53.2%. In Różańsk, the indicator was 32.1%.

These indicators are also confirmed in the next answers to the question on whether people in the area live in harmony with each other, regardless of the differences that divide them. The highest rate of confirmation of this situation is found in Różańsk at 70.7%. At 47.5%, the residents of Rychnow and Chłopov confirmed this situation.

Respondents indicated that they generally like their neighbours. The evaluation rates are at a similar level to the previous ones. The highest is in Różańsk - 80.8%. In Rychnow and Chłopów it was 54.4% each.

The above indicators testify to a high level of social capital in the surveyed villages, characterised by a high level of social trust. The researched villages are not threatened by collapse, disruption of relations, extinction. Rather, the problem is the inertia of their inhabitants, passively submitting to external pressures and difficulties.

4. Conclusions

In summary, the people of Różańsk are one of the more active communities in the area and beyond. The work that has been put into the development of the village is judged to be of a very good standard. If it is to continue to develop in this way, it is worth developing a long-term strategy that will allow the village to continue to develop at a similar or higher level. At the moment, particular attention should be

paid to activities involving a larger proportion of Różansko in the implementation of the initiatives undertaken.

Rychnów is a relatively small village, isolated by road infrastructure from other villages, but the level of social involvement is quite high here thanks to the active Rural Housewives' Circle, whose members involve the inhabitants in grassroots initiatives of a social nature.

Rychnów has many assets to build strong social capital. The problems faced by the inhabitants are not dissimilar to those in many similar villages. Therefore, with the right model of action, the village will be able to jointly solve the problems identified in the research analysis.

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