

## **Town and countryside in flux**

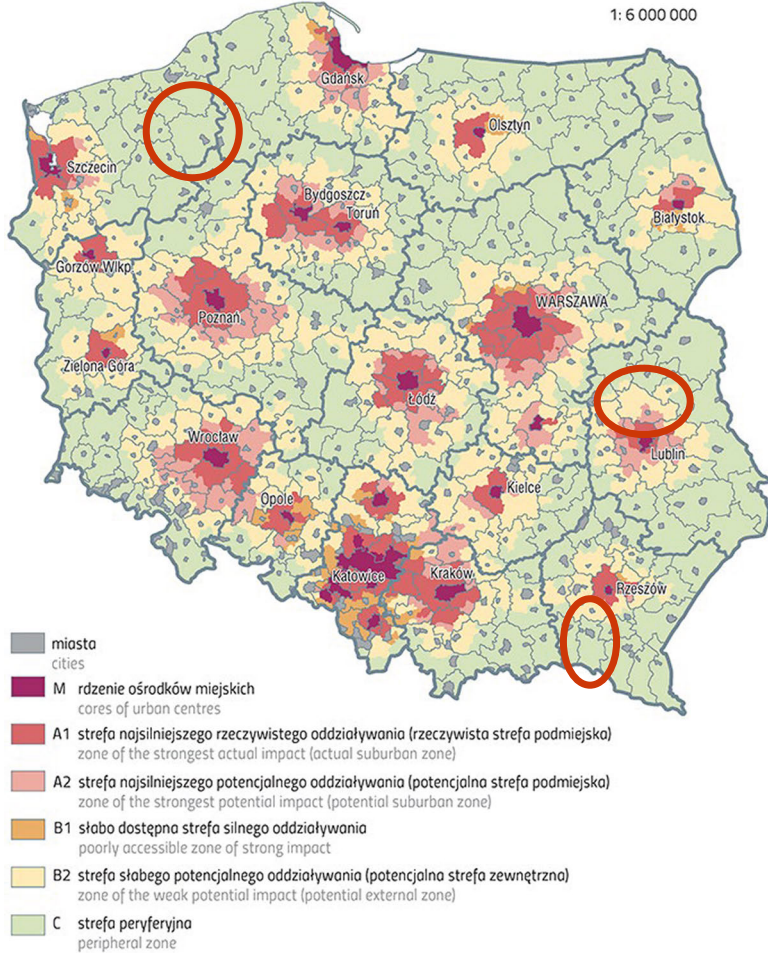
The significance of urban functions for the vitality of rural areas and the importance of individual and systemic solutions for the realisation of a growth-critical way of life

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Rural life can be described in many different ways depending on who is talking, thinking or writing about precisely which rural areas. Descriptions of rural areas often view them in relation to urban centres and distinguish between rural areas that are close to cities and those on the periphery. What is the importance of cities for people who live in rural areas far away from urban centres? How important is physical distance from areas of economic growth for the everyday life and work of these people? What individual and systemic solutions are there and could there be that would make a growth-critical way of life possible? This is the subject of this article. The discussion is based on the example of statements, observations and experiences of people who live in rural areas, some of which are remotely located. Firstly, examples are drawn from qualitative interviews that I conducted as part of an empirical investigation in two different rural areas in east and south-east Poland. Secondly, the findings are based on my own observations of everyday life and work in a small village located far from urban centres in north-west Poland (see Figure 1 for the location of the case-study regions).

*Figure 1: Location of the districts of Szczecinek (north-west), Lubartów (east) and Krosno (south-east), where the case studies described below originate. The map also shows the distribution of town and cities (grey), the spheres of influence of urban centres (red-orange-yellow) and the distribution of peripheral areas (green) in Poland.*



Source: author based on Bański/Czapiewski (2009)

In order to gain a better understanding of the context of the case studies discussed below, I first present some general characteristics of rural areas in

Poland. In addition, I briefly describe how a number of political documents view the relationship between rural and urban areas in Poland. In some measure, rural areas in Poland are conversely defined as non-urban, as 'districts beyond the administrative boundaries of cities, thus as rural municipalities or as rural parts of urban-rural municipalities' (MRiRW 2014: 75). Whether municipalities are regarded as urban or rural depends on the population density. This categorisation classifies 93.1% of Poland's territory as rural and suggests that 39.2% of the Polish population live in rural areas (see MRiRW 2014: 8). However, even if definitions of rural areas distinguish them from urban, elsewhere the two spatial categories are described as being interrelated. Strategic and conceptual documents like, e. g., the 'Strategy for the sustainable development of rural areas, agriculture and fishing 2012–2020'<sup>1</sup> and the 'National spatial planning concept'<sup>2</sup> describe both the diversity of rural and urban areas – their diverse socio-economic constellations and associated functions, problems and development opportunities – and also the mutual relations between rural areas and cities. When examined more closely, however, these documents are concerned with the relationship between rural areas and *a specific type* of urban area: the economically prosperous, infrastructurally well-equipped and culturally attractive urban centres. The focus is thus on the relationship between rural areas and urban areas characterised by economic growth and its consequences – desirable and undesirable. Rural areas account for by far the largest share of the territory of Poland. While the network of towns and cities is spread quite evenly across the country it is not as dense as, e. g., in Germany, which is of similar size. This means that in Poland a fairly high proportion of rural areas are located comparatively far away from urban centres and 'growth areas' (see Figure 1).

Of interest here is the importance for rural dwellers not only of the potential accessibility of the administrative entity 'city' but also of the actual availability of specific functions associated with (economically prosperous) cities. This will be demonstrated in the following using examples from the everyday

1 Original title of the document: 'Strategia zrównoważonego rozwoju wsi, rolnictwa i rybactwa na lata 2012–2020. Załącznik do uchwały nr 163 Rady Ministrów z dnia 25 kwietnia 2012 r. (poz. 839).' (MP 2012 poz. 839)

2 Original title of the document: 'Koncepcja przestrzennego zagospodarowania kraju 2030. Załącznik do uchwały nr 239 Rady Ministrów z dnia 13 grudnia 2011 r. (poz. 252).' (MP 2012 poz. 252)

life of people who live in rural areas, in some cases in peripheral locations. The examples are related to the topics of mobility, agriculture and securing a living, and lifestyle preferences. They reflect many socially and ecologically problematic phenomena, the causes and increase of which are linked to economic processes of growth and concentration and solutions for which are sought in the growth-critical sustainability discussion.

## Mobility

Mobility makes it possible to reach an urban centre from a rural area in the first place. A great deal can only be dealt with in the city – purchases beyond what can be bought in the village shop, attending school and cultural events, visits to (specialist) doctors and the authorities, and not least gainful employment. Access to this social infrastructure is necessary. In order to access it despite the lack of or marginal nature of public transport links from villages to the nearest urban centres, individual motorised mobility has been increasing for years. This is also the case in the rural areas which are the focus of this article. The effects of this individual mobility on the volume of traffic and the way in which the relationship between urban and rural areas has been changed by the accessibility thus created is impressively demonstrated by the following quote:

‘My husband and I live with our two grown-up children in the countryside. Two years ago, we moved to a house in a village. It’s wonderful and we never want to go back to the city. But we can only say that because four cars are parked in our backyard. In the mornings each of us takes one of them and drives off in a different direction. Ten years ago, we would never have moved to a village because if you lived in a village then there was simply no chance of getting away from it.’ (WSPGOA)<sup>3</sup>

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3 The quotes come from interviews that were carried out for the empirical investigation described above, and from private conversations. Both the interviews and the private conversations were conducted in Polish. The abbreviations at the end of the quotes (e. g. WSPGOA) provide information about the origin of the interviewee or interlocutor, but remain encoded here to ensure data protection.

The quote shows how the solution to problems on the one hand can have consequences on the other hand. Individual mobility has made cities and important social infrastructure accessible to the residents of rural areas. The decision of the woman speaking and her family in favour of a lifestyle oriented towards 'less' has consequences in the form of a simultaneous 'more'. 'Less' here refers to the slower or generally more restricted availability and utilisation of goods and services found in the city, as called for in the growth-critical debate with demands for a sufficient lifestyle (see Linz/Bartelmus/Hennicke et al. 2002; Mölders/Szumelda/Winterfeld 2014; Paech 2012; Sachs 1993; Stengel 2011). However, ultimately this 'less' is not necessarily sufficiency oriented and the 'less' with regards to urban noise and built-up space is associated with a 'more' in terms of the traffic volumes, noise and emissions pollution, congested streets, higher resource consumption etc. that are linked to individual motorised mobility. The tone of the quote cited above suggests that the speaker is conscious of the ambivalence of increasing individual mobility. However, for the family decision, the scales tipped in favour of the desired life in the countryside (which they did not necessarily view as growth critical), as the availability of individual mobility meant that they did not have to give up links to the city.

Such decisions, and the wish of rural residents to be connected to urban infrastructure, are understandable. To counter the consequences associated with increased individual mobility, it is therefore worth considering a policy-based or entrepreneurial approach to creating or maintaining connectivity between rural areas and cities. In the rural district of Szczecinek in north-west Poland, there are examples of both. A private bus company from the area has taken on the task of providing bus connections between a number of surrounding villages and the city of Szczecinek. The service is comparatively frequent, which makes it an attractive alternative to the car, providing good mobility in particular for older people from the villages and school students. Since September 2019, the city of Szczecinek has also offered a free bus service. These free bus routes are restricted to the urban area – buses travelling beyond the urban area to the nearest villages must still be paid for, although options are being explored for making at least some of them free of charge in the future, as was once the case for a limited period of time. The motivation for the free buses is not necessarily to be found in the town council's ecological or growth-critical convictions, but rather in the need to fulfil election promises made at the last municipal election. It is possible for the

municipality to finance the venture thanks to business taxes received from a large and prosperous company located in the urban area – income that is not available to every municipality. However, despite all reservations concerning motivation and finance, ultimately the free urban service makes a notable contribution to reducing car traffic in the city.

## **Agriculture and securing a living**

The rural regions where the examples used in this article are located, are on the opposite geographical sides of Poland (see red circles in Figure 1). The differences between the regions in east and south-east Poland and the region in the north-west in terms of agricultural structures could hardly be greater. Even in the socialist era there were scarcely any large state agricultural enterprises in east and south-east Poland and today agricultural structures continue to be characterised by small-scale family farms, while the north-west was dominated by large state farms until 1989 and today still displays a large-scale agricultural structure. Thus, for instance, in 2019 the average size of farms in the south-eastern voivodeship of Podkarpackie was 4.90 hectares, while in the north-western voivodeship of Zachodniopomorskie it was 31.44 hectares (ARiMR 2019). The social upheavals and challenges associated with the regionally specific, structural transformation of agriculture are nonetheless quite similar in both regions. Agriculture has lost significance as a source of income since the 1990s. Particularly in the south-east, the majority of the agricultural holdings are simply too small to generate a sufficient and satisfactory income (see Szumelda 2019). In the north-west, the closure of the state farms after 1989 put almost all the employees out of their jobs without enough alternative sources of income having developed outside of agriculture.

Being able to make a living is essential to rural dwellers. Both in the east and south-east with their small-scale agricultural structures and in the north-west with its large-scale structures, there are fewer and fewer opportunities to do so within agriculture, which has left more people dependent on sources of income from elsewhere – usually in cities. Farmers from the small-scale agricultural structures of east and south-east Poland who I spoke to in the course of the empirical investigation, repeatedly reported on the migration of their adult children to the nearby (or in some cases, more

distant) cities, because the children did not see any chance of earning their livings with jobs in the countryside. In light of the limited profitability of the small agricultural enterprises in particular, a number of farmers actually explicitly advise their children not to remain in farming but to focus rather on a different profession, as the following statement from a farmer makes clear:

'I already told my sons and my daughter in the past, you can live in the country but work in the city. Because this farm doesn't bring in any income. I won't persuade any of my children to stay here in the village and take over the farm when we are no longer here. There's no point, just turning over the field. But they can live here.' (WLPLAK)

If no employment is available in a nearby city then several of the farmers do not see any way in which they could leave farming and pursue another professional occupation. They remain in agriculture due to a lack of alternatives and assess their work in farming with corresponding diffidence:

'Maybe I like it, maybe not, you get used to it so and just keep doing it. And also where would you find another job here?' (WPPKOA).

These examples also highlight the ambivalence of a number of (supposedly) growth-critical lifestyles and the problematic phenomena associated with them, particularly social aspects. On the one hand, in many respects there is extremely justifiable criticism of the intensive, industrial and very growth-oriented production methods that are often associated with large-scale agricultural structures. However, on the other hand, it is not possible to draw the reverse conclusion that 'small-scale' agricultural structures are per se and unreservedly compatible with (growth-critical) sustainability concepts simply because they seem to fulfil demands formulated in the growth-critical debate for sufficient and subsistent lifestyles. As the examples presented above demonstrate, from the point of view of those who run the small farms and have to independently earn their livings from them, 'small' is sometimes 'too small'. If they are unable to extend their farms and hence their incomes, then this can result in the inadequate securing of their livelihoods and in poverty. And if the farmers only remain in agriculture because they lack alternatives and not because of a freely made decision,

then this can lead to great dissatisfaction with the situation or to a resigned attitude, as illustrated by the farmer's statement above. Both phenomena – the inadequate securing of a livelihood and dissatisfaction with a way of life that was not chosen voluntarily – are incompatible with (growth-critical) sustainability considerations, especially in social terms.

However, the talks with farmers in east and south-east Poland showed that there are ways of earning an adequate income and securing a satisfactory living even with a small farm. Some farmers recognise and make use of options within farming. For instance, they come together to form producer organisations, specialise their farms, make optimal use of the natural conditions and enter into various formal and informal collaborations. In this way they are able to earn an adequate and satisfactory income with their small farms. The farmers express satisfaction with their professional situation, their income and general living conditions. An example from the rural region in north-east Poland furthermore shows that it is not only small-scale agricultural structures that are potentially compatible with a growth-critical lifestyle. The large biodynamic farm where I work is located in this area and covers about 2000 hectares. Given the size of the farm it is tempting to apply growth-related criticism but, especially in agriculture, it is not only the size of structures that is important but also the kind of agricultural methods in use. The biodynamic approach is growth critical in that it consciously renounces quick, short-term and large financial profits and has many ecological advantages. In social terms, the large structure is also advantageous because having many workers means that each individual can take holiday and days off and also find cover for illness – something that farmers working on their own often struggle with, especially those in animal husbandry.

The EU's common agricultural policy with its pronounced spatial impact has a particular role to play in enabling the systematic take up of individual or entrepreneurial solutions of this kind. In order to avoid only supporting agriculture that is based on the growth of farms and production, funding should be directed particularly towards producer organisations and sustainable farming methods, which often require a greater number of labourers (and are thus more cost-intensive) and therefore are not currently used by the majority of farms.

## Lifestyle preferences

In the relationship between urban and rural, many people are attracted not least by the urban lifestyle. Naturally tastes differ and different people come to different conclusions about what it is like to live in the city or in the countryside. For instance, a number of rural dwellers particularly value things that are often linked to rural areas – the quiet, the few people, being surrounded by nature. A farmer in east Poland told me:

'I like to fish. Then I sit by the river and the frogs croak. Sometimes in the evening, if it's warm, my wife and I sit on the steps and listen to the frogs croaking from the meadows. Anyone who hasn't experienced that will probably ask themselves, what does he see in these frogs? But they should just come and listen. It's really wonderful when you sit there at night and the nightingale sings. Those are things that you don't pay attention to in everyday life because nobody has time for them, but if you have a moment and attend to it, then it's very lovely. Sometimes my wife asks me why are you going there, to the river? Why don't you sleep in? [...] But when I sit there, even if I'm not sleeping, I rest.' (WLPLOK)

For another farmer from south-east Poland I spoke to, it cannot be deserted enough, even in a sparsely populated area:

'There are more and more people here, everything's being built up. There are still a few villages in the area but everything's being bought up. You can't find peace and quiet anywhere now. I'm thinking of emigrating to Ukraine...' (WPPKIB)

But it is not like that for everyone and not everyone finds themselves in the countryside by choice, as the statement by one farmer shows:

'I love cities, I like marketplaces best. I love them. I can't see enough of the old buildings. [...] Here in the village it's pitch-black, except when the moon shines at night, then it's lovely. I love it when the moon shines, that's beautiful, but only then. [...] I love it when it's light, I don't like the dark, not at all. And then it's also so quiet here, a deathly silence. [...] In the countryside it's quiet, yes, but you also get bored with this quiet.' (WPPKZK)

Opportunities for children and young people to venture beyond a particular radius around the village where they live also contributes to their education and self-confidence. The head of a village in south-east Poland who is particularly committed to children and young people from her village, talks about the great experience it was for them to take part in sporting events and thus to have the opportunity to travel as they had never before '*got beyond D.*' (WPPKAW). She explained that the self-confidence of the children and young people benefited enormously, afterwards they behaved quite differently in school and also generally.

These examples are related more to the cultural than the material level of the everyday life of rural dwellers, but they too highlight the field of tension between the sufficiency lifestyles called for by growth critics and the consequences that arise from a rejection of these (not always freely chosen) lifestyles. Lifestyle preferences are an individual decision. It is difficult to imagine being allowed to prescribe whether someone should live in the city or in the countryside. Someone who feels more comfortable and fulfilled with an urban way of life or who seeks the proximity of a centre of economic growth for simple 'reasons of survival' (securing a livelihood) cannot be blamed for this. Nonetheless migration to (prospering) cities, that is, to centres of economic growth, causes problematic phenomena like urbanisation, high population density, rising rents, overloaded communication and supply infrastructures, etc., while the rural areas face difficulties associated with the thinning of the population (depopulation).

It is thus even more important to consider the examples presented above that illustrate how individual lifestyle preferences can be taken into account on a systemic level without causing problematic phenomena – accompanied by the decoupling of cities from rural areas, or centres of economic growth from areas with too little growth. The examples show the importance of the anchor functions that cities have in the countryside surrounding them. For rural dwellers it is important not just that cities are accessible. Rather, above all, certain cultural and material urban functions must be maintained so residents can pursue their lifestyle preferences without necessarily having to leave the rural areas where they live. The Polish network of cities is spread fairly evenly across the country, which provides good potential for establishing anchors of this sort throughout the country. However, especially the smaller urban centres with less than 50,000 inhabitants face challenges in maintaining their urban functions. Many of these centres are just as affected

by outwards migration as the rural areas. The closure of businesses and the downsizing of the administration and supply structures has meant that they can provide fewer and fewer gainful employment opportunities and are therefore increasingly unattractive, especially for younger people. In contrast, in Poland businesses and people alike are particularly attracted by the so-called Big Five, the metropolitan regions of Warsaw, Krakow, Poznan and Wroclaw and the region of Gdansk, each of which has over a million residents. Economic growth and population increase are concentrated in these metropolitan regions. Businesses and people decide to move to these metropolitan regions rather than to smaller urban centres, which leads to the smaller cities becoming progressively smaller until at some point they are 'too small' to fulfil their urban functions and thus their anchor functions for the urban population and for the residents of the surrounding rural areas, as Przemysław Śleszyński, Professor at the Institute of Geography and Spatial Organisation of the Polish Academy of Sciences,<sup>4</sup> explained in an interview with the newspaper *Gazeta Prawna* (2018). This presents regional planning research and policy with the task and challenge of developing instruments that can counter this pull effect and the problematic phenomena associated with it on many levels, both in the metropolitan regions and in the areas located beyond them.

## Resumé

This article has discussed examples from the everyday lives of people who live in rural areas, some of which are located far from urban centres. It has illustrated the great importance of the accessibility of cities and the maintenance of urban functions, especially in smaller urban centres. This ensures the vitality of the surrounding rural areas and facilitates sufficiency-oriented lifestyles. The examples referred to the topics of mobility, agriculture and securing a living, and lifestyle preferences. They highlight some of the consequences of the concentration of excessive economic growth in a few regions and the simultaneous absence or at least severe restriction of growth processes in other regions. The case studies show the effects that the unequal distribution of economic growth processes has on the every-

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4 Polish name of the institute: *Instytut Geografii i Przestrzennego Zagospodarowania PAN*

day life of people dwelling in rural regions, some of which are far from the centres of economic growth. The strong concentration and thus unequal distribution of economic growth processes can be countered on individual, entrepreneurial and systemic levels. The examples discussed show that the local (municipal), national (regional planning) and international (agricultural policy) political levels can be effective here. From a growth-critical and sustainability-oriented perspective, it is valuable to consider cities and rural areas in their functional interconnections. Especially instruments of spatial planning and agricultural policy should target this functional connection much more strongly than has been the case to date. It is important to work towards maintaining the urban functions of (small) towns in order to strengthen their anchor function for the rural areas surrounding them, promote regional economic cycles and counteract the emergence of social, economic and ecological imbalances between regions.

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