

RURALITY IN HUNGARY IN GENERAL

BÁLINT CSATÁRI

European emphasis on rural research and development

Two typical and distinct units of the spatial structure of comprehensive and global urbanisation in the 20th century – with a profound impact on the economy, society and settlements – are urban and rural districts. Rural areas were, as it were, ‘sufferers’ of the effects of urbanisation, particularly in the initial phases of this rather intense spatial transformation. Agrarian crises including migration, depopulation, ageing and marginalisation were the most common phenomena in village/rural districts.

This is, indeed, why attention turned, to an increasing degree, to the transformation of ‘non-urban districts’ and likely solutions to their modernisation mainly in West European countries in the 1970s, following waves of intense concentration of urbanisation in developed economies.

In Hungary such changes occurred much later and followed a path ‘approved’ by state socialism. Accordingly, only recently have very similar ‘rural symptoms’ emerged here, with a simultaneous shift in academic attention towards them.

As to these issues, politics often comes heavily into play. Debates on the dichotomy of rurality and urbanity, suppressed in the socialist era, were resumed after the changeover. Also the political and common interpretation of the statement that “compared to Budapest, ‘Hungary excluding Budapest forms one contiguous rural area’” frequently presents problems as regards the substantive perception of rurality.

Whether current ‘modern’ rural spatial processes in Hungary, coming late onto the scene, follow a path similar to the one that their Western counterparts did, raises a series of intriguing questions.

The first related problem that developed European economies had to resolve mostly in the 1960s was the inevitable and radical transformation of agrarian production as well as land and area utilisation. This was followed by a gradual rise in the awareness of the relative advantages of rural districts, with the resulting planned and deliberate development of landscape and nature protection in these countries.

The second major stage of transformation, especially when the infrastructure between cities and their respective environs had been successfully established and the spatial unevenness of its quality had been made more equal, was characterised

by the emergence first of commuting, and then phenomena accompanying agglomeration and suburbanisation in the rural space; new village-like functions (e.g. second homes) initially of a residential and later recreational type followed swiftly and mushroomed in rural areas.

Furthermore, disputes over rurality are imbued – and not just in Hungary – with the clashes and contradictions between urban mass culture and village/rural traditions, constantly-recurring differences in income and social opportunities, and resulting spatial, settlement-related, social and political conflicts.

The initial key issue of the development of rural/village-like regions that faced developed European economies was the same as the one currently facing Hungary. As a French author once put it, ‘The future of villages and rural areas hinges on solutions to objectively existing problems of agrarian production under various natural environmental, economic and social conditions.’ (George, 1963).

Dealing with this topic, a textbook used at British universities in the 1970s discussed three provincial issues of a much broader scope, namely the depopulation of rural areas, the ‘re-population’ of certain regions, commuting, burgeoning social mobility and evolving links as well as the need for consistent landscape planning and provincial development warranted by an increasing demand for recreational and landscape development (Clout, 1972).

A series of excellent analyses addressed the issue of access to rural space and settlements as a fundamental issue as well as the need for the deliberate development of ‘key settlements’ acting as suppliers and service providers in villages and small towns (Mosely, 1979).

Conducted in the wake of partially successful rural development interventions that had then been going on for close to one and a half decades, studies examining this topic in the 1980s and 1990s unambiguously chose, as the focus of their analyses and proposals for rural development, the issue of subtly defined environmental, economic and social sustainability looked at from a variety of perspectives (Briant–Maroi, 1995). In general, the objectives and results of these studies on rural and village geography were closely related to the practice of spatial development that had been gaining ground.

It is the well-known Brundtland Report that provides the most general definition of sustainable rural development, claiming that ‘rural development must be uncompromising, and implemented in a manner that provides all the values, opportunities and necessities that can be reasonably expected.’ (WCED 1987) Sustainability thus interpreted is strongly linked to the need for the mitigation of regional inequalities, not only in terms of economic development, but also to an improved awareness of the role of the environment and, most recently, the need for creating ‘living conditions that are as good as those in the city’ on a small regional scale (Mayer, 2000).

Emphasising the wide variety of interpretations and stressing that the motives underlying them vary from country to country, studies on rural development seem to agree on the following prioritised points of action:

- nature protection, the heritage of the rural landscape and a balanced relationship between landscapes and settlements;
- new dimensions and development capabilities of the town and country relationship;
- issues of local identity and local communities.

What is more, they all highlight the moral (the legal system and social equality), social (community and self-esteem) and material (water, food, personal safety and security) aspects of development philosophies concerning rural space. Scientific approaches strive to make a clear distinction between sustainable and environmentally friendly agrarian and rural development and the demands and capabilities of profit-driven agriculture, emphasising, as a rule, the particular role that village communities play in renewal.

In evaluating the processes of rural transformation, the literature published in developed European economies on rural settlement and small regional development makes use of a suitably wide variety of methods and theoretical approaches, stressing the need for adopting a sophisticated approach to these issues.

To sum up, there are three distinct phases of rural research:

- that of identifying, examining and resolving problems and effects connected with agriculture and forestry,
- the improvement of supplies/goods offered in rural areas warranted by changes in the economic and social structure of rural space, also encouraged by spatial solidarity and
- in the wake of the emergence of new rural/village functions, the interpretation of sustainable modern rural development and a customised application of such an interpretation in a manner that reflects the diversity of areas.

It is worth noting that, in all the countries where rural development was fairly successful – including, for instance, the UK, the Netherlands and Scandinavia – the results of scientific research and the various stages of the development outlined in them were followed by the introduction of a series of training programmes, indispensable for the implementation of rural development, as well as the establishment of the institutional system of planning and local economic and social development and a network of specialised professionals.

Conceptual approaches to defining the rural area

There are several approaches to providing a definition for the rural area. The initial problem arises from its numerous possible interpretations and translations from foreign languages into our language.

Recalling the title of Ferenc Erdei's classic book, we would suggest that the simplest way of defining the rural area is to say that it is 'the environs of a city'. According to this interpretation, the very concept implies an attitude, a relationship and a network of various links. Thus the rural area, in its broadest sense, means a 'non-urban space' woven from a loose fabric of settlements. Its most fundamental characteristic is the dominance of the utilisation of the agricultural landscape, with villages and other scattered settlements belonging to an urban centre of some indefinite size and quality.

Nevertheless, the rural area (or the countryside) is best defined by the specific and typical geographical processes taking place in it, including landscape and nature protection, the utilisation of indigenous natural resources (e.g. water and resources of a recreational nature), food production, its classic 'duty', and residential and employment functions. As for residential and employment functions, today they offer a full range of modern rural living conditions. That said, as regards the town and country relationships, spatial relationships (e.g. communications and commuting) in this space as well as the way service providers and suppliers operate in the 'countryside-like space' are particularly important.

Traditional village geography defines the rural area as "hinterland". Having particular settlement, economic and social-setting and special development characteristics, it is quite distinct from urban space. Obviously, the characteristics of rural space are different in developed countries where the influx of the population into cities and the traditional expansion of the urban space had finished by the 1950s and 1960s. They are different from those in the developing world where such processes are still ongoing.

The size, functions and built-up environment of the settlements in rural space can also serve as a basis for defining the rural area. Broadly speaking, scattered settlements (farmsteads) and villages of various sizes with a low proportion of built-up areas and an increasingly wide selection of functions and, based on good indicators provided by a number of studies, small towns with a population of 10,000 to 20,000 are unequivocally rural settlements.

Many believe that, as the definition of the city is more unambiguous, the village is simply a non-urban settlement; likewise, the rural area is a 'non-city-like area'. In Cloke's opinion the space that the majority of its residents consider to be rural is a village or rural area.

The specific emergence, content and geographical picture of rural functions, along with an increasing awareness of what they look like, can be considered as

factors which play a key role in the definition of the rural area (Cloke, 1983). Add to this the way of life and lifestyle typical of the rural space, social and family relationships and the special spatial cohesion they create as well as the unique quality and awareness of the environment and 'the rural space lived in'.

A common feature of attempts at defining and categorising rural areas in Hungary and of related debates is that, for the time being, they almost exclusively adopt the approach of agriculture and the agrarian community (Kovács, 1998; Romány, 1998; Fehér, 1998; Dorgai, 1998). This should hardly come as a surprise since, owing to the time lag mentioned above, it is only recently that rural space in Hungary has become the scene of agrarian transformation and development of the kind that occurred two or three decades ago in developed economies.

A major problem that has surfaced in the debates on the definition of the rural area is that the encouragement of a scientific classification and attempts at reaching a 'uniform' definition may easily clash with economic and political interests articulated with varying degrees of underlying influence (Fehér, 1998). Thus applying for European funds alone may exert a significant impact on the (flexible) definitions and classifications of rural areas. So may the fact that a professionally satisfactorily substantiated definition of the rural area based on multi-disciplinary results and a consensus would necessarily differ from those based on indicators and priorities set as objectives to be achieved through the use of various funds (Dorgai, 1998). Neither does there seem to be any consensus – at the settlement and regional levels – about the interpretation of the rural area. However, there does seem to be a point of consensus on small regions as the spatial unit of the rural area making up a collection of typically rural settlements.

Hence it is difficult, if not impossible, to give a precise and succinct definition of the rural area. The above approaches undoubtedly reflect a certain degree of relativity, the essence of which being that rural space is primarily characterised by the deliberate manifestations and special development interventions of the relationship involving human society and space, which are unique to rural spaces. Thus the spatial aggregate of these special manifestations and the economic and social functions (environment, agricultural, economic, residential and recreational) unique to this space can be regarded as the most general definition of the rural area.

The countryside as a target area for development

Another major approach claims that the definition of the countryside (rural area) as a target area for development is of crucial importance. In this respect, the conceptual and spatial policy agreement as put forward by the European Charter of Rural Areas is generally accepted throughout most of Europe.

EU policy aimed at these regions, that is the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and its policy on the use of Structural and Cohesion Funds, generally refer to space and 'the development of multi-functional rural areas' where – 'in line with the management of European urban regions' –, 'new sustainable development can be implemented'.

A further basic principle is that of subsidiarity, that is local and regional authorities and local governments, which are fully conversant with local residents and their problems, should be responsible for the development of rural regions. The Charter suggests that 'These authorities should be primarily relied upon. Co-operation between them and their objectives should be encouraged.' The Charter provides a definition of rural areas and their characteristics, allowing for – owing to its very nature – a rather broad interpretation. According to this, 'the rural region' is an area in a broader sense of the word or a 'coastal' area where villages and smaller towns form a uniform economic and social unit. Compared to 'urban regions',

- the concentration of the population as well as economic, social and cultural structures is significantly lower here;
- most of the area here is employed for the purposes of agriculture, forestry, nature protection and recreation.¹

It follows that both scientific and spatial development literature on the definition of *target areas for intervention of rural development* is rather extensive, taking the form of various calculations of what is called 'the rurality index' based on indicators developed using sophisticated methods. Population density and (usually) indicators of target areas and small regions to be classified are used to determine percentage indicators that denote the population concentration.

What is called 'the rurality criterion index' (defined by the OECD), for instance, views a spatial unit (normally a small region) as fundamentally rural where less than 50% of the population live in an area with population density below 150 persons/km². That is, this simple indicator alone reflects the relativity of rurality if cities with high population density are excluded, and reflects the low settlement concentration of the classified rural area.

Essentially, various specific classifications of rural areas and index definitions, which vary from one country to the next, depend on public administrative and regional units and their size. In the UK and other highly urbanised countries it is often the case that fundamentally urban districts are separate public administrative

¹ Article 3 that follows the above definition and Article 28 stipulating the national classification of rural areas based on the definition identify classification as the statutory obligation of signatories to the Charter. Classifications, along with the signatory documents of the Charter, must be submitted to the Secretary General of the European Council. The same applies to any subsequent modification of the classification of rural areas.

units; 'interim or highly rural' districts are measured against them. As a rule, classifications affect township and municipal levels of public administration (Cloke, 1983, p.10).

More sophisticated classifications of rural districts combine these simple indicators with those reflecting processes typical of village space, e.g. a higher-than-average proportion of agricultural workers, unemployment, the index of ageing and migration.

With respect to the use and development of rural space, natural heritage, recreational capabilities, environmentally sensitive areas, the sensitivity of which is established using various methods, and partially renewable natural resources (e.g. soil and waters) constitute an important and relatively new group of factors. These characteristically rural functions of protection, conservation and landscape rehabilitation are becoming an increasingly important part of environment development philosophies targeting rural space in developed economies.

The previous approaches to and interpretations of rural objectives are manifold. It follows then that research into and development of target areas matched with such objectives may add further detail to the perception of rural goals and target areas. The ultimate meaning of entire social interests and regional values that they reflect is that the European landscape should be populated, well looked after, and used in a sustainable and fully justified manner.

European rural development policies have an increasingly significant role to play in the establishment and even reinforcement of regional-level economic, social and area cohesion, with the system of financial support for the productive, social and environment protection functions – the three 'key functions' of these special European policies – evolving gradually (Situation and Outlook, 1997).

Types of rural space

Based on the above, it is evident that formulating a precise definition of the rural area and rural area-like regions is nigh impossible. A rural area-like region may be a region

- that is not urban area-like,
- with settlements that are, generally speaking, rural in nature, a settlement structure dominated by villages and scattered farmsteads and a centre that is a small town (or a market town),
- with a low regional concentration of economic and institutional systems,
- where the dominance of the agricultural sector is characteristic or even predominant in certain regions and
- whose community identifies itself as 'rural'.

The 'rural area-like' nature of regions may be reinforced by their agrarian nature, landscape characteristics, relics of folk architecture, peasant/folk traditions as well as archaic social norms and traditions.

The chart below serves as a basis for the definition of Hungary's rural areas and small regions (the percentage of a given region's population living in settlements with population density below 120 persons/km²)

Based on this, 57.8 % of the settlements in Hungary are located in rural regions; in 61% of the country's area the rural population is 39.7% of the country's population, with that of Budapest excluded. European and domestic funds earmarked for rural development should be channelled in a more concentrated manner than previously to designated target areas.

This is further justified by the fact that rural classification based on this single indicator correlates with nearly all the above rural indicators that may urgently warrant targeted interventions of rural development. The rural population is declining and ageing, the dominance of agriculture is high and income in rural areas is falling behind the national average to a great extent.

Conclusions

Without a doubt, rural regions in former Soviet bloc countries are losers of the major economic and political transformation that the regime change brought about.

Growing regional inequalities have hit these regions particularly hard.

Rural regions in Hungary do not seem to have any other choice than to follow the path that spanned approximately three decades in the West, from which emerged a dedicated network of a viable policy frameworks, facilities and the institutional system needed for rural development.

Each stage of development will have to be covered. It is only time durations that could be shortened. For the time being, however, political commitment to this seems to be rather moderate.

References

- Bryant, C. R.–Marois, C. 1995: The sustainability of rural system, 1995. Montreal.
Cloke, P. J. 1979: Key settlements in rural area, 1979. London.
Cloke, P. J. 1983: An introduction to rural settlement planning, 1983, London.
Cloke, P. J.–Park, C. C. 1985: Rural Resource Management, 1985, New York.
Clout, H. D. 1972: Rural geography, 1972, London.

- Csatári, B. 1996: A magyarországi kistérségek néhány jellegzetessége, MTA RKK ATI, Kecskemét, PHARE kiadvány, p. 27
- Csatári, B. 1999: A magyar vidék térségi tagozódása (Articulation of rural areas in Hungary). – Pécs, MTA Regionális Kutatások Központja, p. 178.
- Csatári, B. 2000: Kísérlet a magyarországi kistérségek komplex fejlődési típusainak meghatározására (Test to define types of the complex development status of Hungarian NUTS 4 [in:] Dövényi, Z. (ed) 2000: Alföld és nagyvilág. Tanulmányok Tóth Józsefnek, Budapest, MTA Földrajztudományi Kutatóintézet, pp. 151–167.
- Dorgai, L. 1998: Néhány gondolat a „MI tekinthető vidéknek?” c. vitacikkhez, (Some idea for “What is countryside?”). – *Gazdálkodás*. 5. pp. 60–64.
- Fehér, A. 1998: A vidék fogalmáról és a vidéki területek lehatárolásáról. – *Gazdálkodás*. 5. pp. 55–59.
- Huigen, P.P.1996: Less planning, more vision! Planning ideas and sustainability for rural areas, 1996, Groningen.
- Keeny, D.R. 1988: Towards a sustainable agriculture, 1988.
- Kovács, T. 1998: Mi tekinthető vidéknek? (What is countryside?). – *Gazdálkodás*. 5. pp. 39 – 48.
- Mayer, J. 2000: Európai munkaközösség a közép- és dél-európai térségekért “regionális egyenlőtlenségek” munkacsoportjának memoranduma. (Memory of the „regional inequality team “ by European Panel For Middle and South European Areas) Bayreuth, 2000. p.4.
- M. Moseley 1979: Accessibility: the rural challenge, 1979. London.
- P. George: Précis de géographie rurale, 1963., Párizs.
- Romány, P. 1998: Miért fontos a vidék? – *Gazdálkodás*. 5. pp. 49–59.
- Situation and Outlook, Rural Developments. European Commission DG VI: CAP 2000, Working Document, 1997.
- WCED – the Brundtland Report, p. 43. 1987.