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THE STATE OF AND PERSPECTIVES FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE OPOLE REGION

Agriculture has always played a major role in the Opole region. This is due to the conditions of the natural environment, which are favourable to agriculture, and to the agricultural policy carried out in the area, supported by the initiatives of local farmers. The natural environment is the most important factor in shaping the use and management of land. However, cultural norms, the size of farms, including their ownership rights, as well as demographic and economic potential play an important role in this sphere.

The favourable environmental conditions result from the fact that approximately 60% of the surface area of the region is composed of good and average agricultural land, including some of the most fertile areas, made up of loess and loess formations. Also, highly fertile silt has been deposited in the Oder valley and valleys of its tributaries. The Opole region is one of the warmest in Poland. It has the longest period of vegetation, 225 days annually. The average temperature is 8°C, in summer 18.5°C and in winter -2°C. The water supply, which is mainly dependent on the level of rainfall, is one of the best in the country. Annual precipitation is within the range 600–800 mm. The number of days in which precipitation occurs is on average 160–180 and snow covers the land on average for only 50 days annually. The region is mainly flat, being part of the Central European plain, with some gentle hills. Over an area of 75% of the region the altitude does not change by more than 40m and relative changes in altitude of 20–40 metres are most common.

The factors of the natural environment form a base for calculating an indicator of the agricultural value of an area. For the Opole region this indicator is 82.8 (on a scale of 0–100), while the national average is 66.6.

Such favourable conditions have stimulated the development of agriculture in the Opole region for centuries.

This region, which was part of first the Prussian and then the German Empire, was of marginal economic importance under the Third Reich. There were no large industrial enterprises located here and so the local inhabitants had to carry out their own agricultural enterprises, in order to ensure their families a living. Between the two world wars agriculture was in a state of collapse in the Opole region. Agriculture was characterised by highly decentralised farms, low productivity (in comparison with other German regions) and farms being in debt [Popkiewicz, 1964, 9–12]. In the post-war period agricultural activity in this favourable region began to develop and change for the better. This resulted primarily from the will of the inhabitants, both immigrants living in the eastern part of the region and the indigenous population characterised by a willingness to work and good management ability. It should be stressed that many of the new settlers in the Opole region were farmers from what was Central Poland before the war (so called *Zabuzanie*). These farmers, despite the small amount of materials in their possession did not spare themselves in farming the land they were given. *"The post-war lack of horses did not slow down work in the field. Horses were replaced by cows, and often by the farmer himself. It was not rare to see strange ploughs in the fields. The machine was pulled by a farmer, together with his wife and young child, instead of by a horse. Such efforts were made to ensure that not one corner of land was left uncultivated"* [Janus, 1959, 62].

The decree of September 6th, 1946 formed the basis for the transformation of the unfavourable structure of agricultural production in the Opole region. This decree set up family farms of between 7 and 15 ha. as the basis of the structure of agricultural production. Land reforms and the process of immigration fundamentally changed the structure of ownership by significantly reducing the number of large farms [Czyżowska, 1964, 77–79]. According to analyses carried out in 1995–1996, it was stated that the western lands gained by Poland after the Second World War were characterised by the highest level of economic and social activity, as well as enterprise and economic growth [*Raport o Rozwoju...*, 2000, 5]. The tempo of change resulting from this agricultural policy meant that the Opole region became the leading agricultural region in the country. As early as 1959 in the Opole region agricultural production in many branches exceeded the pre-war level. At the beginning of the sixties there were 248 state farms, which covered an area of 100 thousand ha. They produced 78.2 thou. tons of corn, with a productivity of 22.6 q per ha [*Rocznik Statystyczny...*, 1964, 158–163]. In spite of this, the six-year plan for the Opole region aimed for a growth of 47%

in general agricultural production, with crop production to increase by 32% and meat production by 83%. It was also decided that fruit and vegetable farming should rapidly develop, in order to satisfy the needs of the Upper Silesia region [*Ustawa o 6-letnim Planie...*, 1950, 163–164]. Agriculture still formed an important factor in the economic development of the Opole region as late as the 70s and 80s. Numerous changes in agricultural policy – from collectivisation to land reform – meant that in the Opole region, as in other regions in Poland, three sectors functioned simultaneously: individual, co-operative and state. Co-operative farms were the form favoured by government. At the same time the government started to promote the development of intensive farming, based on the use of large amounts of fertilisers. This type of agriculture developed until almost the end of the 1980s. In 1989, the Opole region produced 3.5% of total national agricultural production and the productivity per hectare was much higher than the national average [Mikołajewicz, 1991, 59]. The economic transformation and resulting change in the structure of ownership led to a weakening of the agricultural sector and of rural development. In the Opole region, the agricultural sector was deemed to be one of the least effective in comparison to the possibilities offered by the conditions of the local environment [*Koncepcja Polityki Przestrzennego...*, 1995, 142]. According to the *Report on Rural Development (Rozwój obszarów wiejskich)* [*Raport o Rozwoju Społecznym...*, 2000] the Opole region belongs to a group of Polish regions, which are characterised by a mixed structure in the agricultural sector. The following are particularly characteristic of the Opole region: the large proportion of land which was formerly owned by state farms (Państwowe Gospodarstwa Rolne – PGR) and co-operative farms, also a large proportion of successful private farms with an average area of 11.7 ha. of agricultural land. The region is also characterised by the large percentage of the workforce, which formerly worked on state and co-operative farms and now, unfortunately, commonly unemployed.

These discussions confirm the hypothesis that favourable environmental conditions are a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the development of agricultural production and of rural areas. It should be stressed that, under the present conditions of the competitive market, rural areas are not only a base for the production of meat and vegetables. Various service functions are rapidly appearing in rural areas and replacing the traditional agricultural services. This can be presently observed in, for example, the diverse criteria used to define rural areas. At present, population density is one of the factors used to define rural areas and not just the functions carried out. In research carried out within Poland on human settlement, a village is defined as a settlement, which

does not have town rights (a legal-administrative criterion). Simultaneously, villages are characterised by the relatively small area they occupy and small number of inhabitants, the large proportion of detached housing, domination of economic activities by farming (inhabitants working and receiving a living from agriculture) and a rural lifestyle [Kuciński, 1996, 106]. However, due to the rapid changes within the rural settlements of the Opole region in the 1990s with respect to the criteria mentioned above, for the purposes of this article the criterion of population density is accepted, as recommended by the OECD. Rural areas are taken to be areas in which the population density does not exceed 150 inhabitants per km². All the towns and urban municipalities fall automatically into urban areas under this definition. Among the remaining municipalities, the following were not classified as rural areas: Komprachcice, Kędzierzyn Koźle, Dobrzeń Wielki.

The south and west of the region form an agricultural zone, which is characterised by the most favourable land to agricultural production. This zone is characterised by very good natural conditions and soil, which provide an excellent basis for carrying out intensive agricultural production and food processing. Another attribute of this zone are areas of great value to recreation and tourism.

Apart from this specifically agricultural zone, a zone defined as dominated by forestry and agriculture occupies the north and north – west of the region. This region does not provide such excellent conditions for agricultural production, since much of the land is covered by forests. However, areas set aside for agricultural production and areas providing recreational and tourism services (e.g. the area of forestry and reservoirs nearby Turawa) play a significant role in the provision of services in this region.

Agricultural land and woodland make up 62.4% and 27.1% of the total area of the region, respectively. These percentages have remained almost unchanged over the previous decade. Rural areas characterised by a high proportion of agricultural land are concentrated in the two zones described above. However, some of the municipalities of these zones are characterised by a lower proportion of agricultural land than the average for the region as a whole. This suggests that these areas are used for other functions. Agricultural land is dominated by arable land (above all in the south and south – west of the region), together with meadows and pastures. A small percentage of agricultural land is occupied by orchards. The fact that the amount of land left fallow has not increased in the last 5 years is a good sign. The Opole region is characterised by the lowest proportion of land left fallow, compared to the other Polish regions.

It should be underlined that each of these zones is heterogeneous with respect to economic and demographic potential, which are factors determining how effectively the attributes of an area can be used for development.

There does not exist a clear relation between the population density in rural areas and the proportion of people working in agriculture within the Opole region. However, the largest proportions of people employed in the agricultural sector are found in areas with the lowest population density. These are the following municipalities: Baborów, Głubczyce and Kietrz, as well as areas in the north of the region. On the other hand, the lowest proportions of people employed in the agricultural sector are found in the municipalities with the highest population density. The inhabitants of these municipalities are often employed in the service sector and in industrial firms located in nearby towns. The situation is particularly unfavourable in the south – west of the region, which is a rural area with a relatively high population density and a relatively high proportion of inhabitants employed in agriculture, but with also a large amount of long-term unemployed. This is a result of a general recession in the towns and municipalities of this area. The following municipalities are experiencing a recession and a resulting lull in job creation: Paczków, Otmuchów, Nysa, Głuchołazy, Łambinowice. Although there is an agricultural tradition and favourable natural conditions, at present this area is a problem area with respect to unemployment.

The introduction to this article shows that the state agricultural policy and the ability of inhabitants to make the most of the potential for agricultural production play a vital role in rural development. The potential of the climatic and natural attributes of the rural areas of the Opole region, together with respect for tradition and hard work, form a basis for the development of organic farming and agro-tourism under the present market economy. The “Rural Renewal in the Opole Region” program (Odnowa wsi w województwie opolskim) being realised currently, which is the only such programme in Poland, is an example of the awareness of farmers about the possibilities for using agricultural land and the initiatives carried out in this field [Kuczuk, 2003, 265–284]. This is a long-term programme, whose main aim is to improve the living standards of the inhabitants of rural areas. The initiatives of the inhabitants within the framework of this programme are particularly important and original. Conflicts can be solved and many negative situations can be avoided in rural areas through the mutual and active co-operation and joint activities of inhabitants with enterprises and institutions of various forms. “Rural Renewal” is regarded as a key element in the Strategy for the Development of the Opole Region for the Years 2000–2015. Apart

from the inhabitants of rural areas, the following organisations are also involved in the implementation of the program: the regional government, councils of rural municipalities, aid programmes for rural areas and agriculture, as well as various institutions and organisations. An important role is played by "The Society for Rural Renewal" ("Stowarzyszenie odnowy wsi"), which was formed in January 2002 as the first voluntary organisation in the country aimed at:

- evaluating the potential of the rural landscape in terms of technical and social infrastructure, landscape, architecture and services,
- initiating and carrying out programmes raising the living standards of rural inhabitants,
- creating the conditions for people to settle, investment, development of services and job creation in the countryside, together with opportunities for earning money from non-agricultural work,
- activating the inhabitants of rural areas and increasing the role of village councils,
- obtaining funds for the development of local communities [*Stowarzyszenie Odnowy Wsi*, 2003].

The "Rural Renewal" program invites a great deal of interest in the Opole region. However, a number of semi-rural municipalities are not covered by it. The rate of growth in the number of municipal and village councils taking part in the program has been impressive. At the beginning of 1997, 17 municipalities and 40 village councils took part in the programme, whereas at the end of 1999, 43 municipalities and 111 village councils participated [Kuczuk, 2003, 265–284]. Hence, in the course of three years the number of councils participating in the programme has nearly tripled. This indicates a growth rate of approx. 60% per annum with respect to the number of councils active in the programme in 1997.

The following are some of the numerous tangible successes of the programme: the building of a sports field and car park in Przecz, the building of a drainage system on a housing estate, the building of a cobble street, connection to the telephone network and building of a sports hall for the local primary school, all in Sorogoszcz [See Kuczuk, 2003, 265–284; *Stowarzyszenie Odnowy Wsi*, 2003]¹. A large proportion of the initiatives initiated in rural areas of the Opole region regard the modernisation of the technical and social infrastructure, especially roads. Aspects of cultural development, preservation of traditions and local identity have not been neglected either. The realisation of such a programme indicates that the rural population of the Opole region is willing to un-

¹See Kuczuk [2003] as well as the internet site of *Odnowa wsi*: 195.117.158.118./Swiatowid/srgg/biuletyn/wydanie9/odnowa_wsi.htm-7k.

dertake activities aimed at improving their standard of living and promoting economic activity. This augurs well for the development of non-agricultural sectors in rural areas.

The multi-functional development of rural areas is associated with the creation of jobs outside the agricultural sector, in small businesses, industry, food processing, services, trade and in sectors connected with agriculture and the attributes of the rural environment. It is aimed at improving the employment structure in rural populations [Grykień, 1997, 15]. Much is expected from the development of agro-business, including agrotourism and ecological farming. Tourism not only enables widening the employment base, but also creates a market for local agricultural products and promotes the personal development of inhabitants of rural areas (for example due to the necessity of improving their qualifications and obtaining new skills and through contact with people who have completely different lifestyles). Such forms of tourism are a key element in the EU's rural development policy. It is estimated that 25% of the population of the EU spend their holidays in rural areas [*Raport o Rozwoju Społecznym...*, 2000, 15].

The potential of the rural landscape in the Opole region for the development of agro-tourism must, however, be supported by an appropriate level of technical infrastructure. In order to attract tourists, it is necessary to provide the necessary accommodation and culinary services. In 2000 only two municipalities in the Opole region provided accommodation for agro-tourism: Głuchłazy and Namysłów [*Rocznik Statystyczny...*, 2001]. Two sites with a total of 11 places available all year round are located in the municipality of Głuchołazy. 208 agro-tourists made use of this accommodation in 2000, including 94 foreign tourists, for a total of 596 nights. In the municipality of Namysłów there is only one site offering 10 places. In 2000 a total of 430 agro-tourists made use of this accommodation, of which 82 were foreign tourists. In total these tourists spent a total of 764 nights in Namysłów. In both cases the largest number of tourists came in the summer. These sites are also involved in organic farming. According to the regulations in *The Act on Organic Farming*, organic farms are characterised by their organic (natural – author's comment) means of agricultural production. Non-processed agricultural crops and products made from such ingredients, including meat and animal products, produced using organic methods are defined to be organic products [*Ustawa o Rolnictwie...*, 2001]². Many of the advantages to be gained from organic farming, for example the production of

² *Ustawa o rolnictwie ekologicznym* (Act on Organic Farming), March 16th, 2001, Chapter 1, Art. 2.

health food and maintaining the state of the environment, may play the role of incentives to the farming community of the Opole region. The natural attributes of the Opole region favour organic farming, since the quality of each individual component making up the environment of the region is high. However, in order for such methods to be propagated, organic farmers must obtain an acceptable income. It is necessary to take into account the fact that resignation from the use of chemical fertilisers leads to a reduction in crop productivity. In addition, the price of organic food is higher than the price of food produced by standard farming methods. The interaction of the elements in the Polish economy, together with the mentality of Polish consumers (which differs greatly from the ideal of a consumer of ecologically friendly goods), indicates that organic farming is economically difficult and risky [Grykień, 1997, 93–96].

The development of activities in the field of organic farming, eco- and agro-tourism, as well as other non-agricultural services depends to a great extent on the demographic and sociological traits of the inhabitants of a region. The age structure of the farming community plays a key role. Young people are more inclined to take the risk of introducing innovative means of production. They also have more opportunities to develop their talents and improve their qualifications. There is a dichotomous division of the Opole region with respect to the proportion of minors and the economic burden quotient for the individual municipalities. Nearly all of the rural municipalities outside of the industrial zone are characterised by a high economic burden quotient. There is a particularly high proportion of “non-working” people in the municipalities on the borders of the Opole region. In the west of the region this may well turn out to be a positive factor, since these municipalities have the highest proportion of minors. This shows that these municipalities have human potential, which may well result in a high level of entrepreneurship in the near future. A necessary condition for such entrepreneurship is the level of education of the population. This, however, is a problem area, since the present level of education of the inhabitants of the Opole region is one of the lowest in the country. Only 69.4% of the inhabitants have finished secondary school. On the other hand, the level of literacy in the population of the Opole region, 99.3%, is relatively high [*Raport o Rozwoju Społecznym...*, 2000, 15]. Another factor influencing the level of innovation in the field of the multi-functional development of rural areas is the level of income of individual farmers and municipalities. The level of GDP per inhabitant for the rural municipalities of the Opole region is relatively high, namely 6612 USD, which gives the region 4th place out of the 16 Polish regions. The living standards of the rural population of the Opole region are much higher than the average living

standards of the rural population of Poland. This is confirmed by the research published in the "Report on Social Development..." cited above³. Expenditure on agriculture as a proportion of municipal budgets is very low, varying from 0 to 1.7%. The level of expenditure of municipalities on agriculture in 2000 is positively associated with the number of farmers on the local council. Thus, people who are interested in rural development are the inhabitants of rural areas themselves. Up till now the positive conditions have not lead to a dynamic growth of agro-business. The Opole region belongs to the group of regions with the lowest level of agro-tourism (together with the Łódź, Świętokrzyski and Mazovia regions). The low level of infrastructure in rural areas, together with a lack of finance to develop it, remains a fundamental barrier [*Raport o Rozwoju Społecznym...*, 2000, 24]. However, according to the authors of "Raport o rozwoju ..." (Report on Social Development), Opole should be a centre of agro-business [*Raport o Rozwoju Społecznym...*, 2000, 24]. The high efficiency and concentration of commercial agricultural production are important attributes of the region. These traits are associated with dynamic rural development, fundamentally created by agriculture. The agro-business sector is dependent on the efficiency of technical and social infrastructure in the non-agricultural sector. The higher the level of such infrastructure, the more possible it is for agro-business in the Opole region to compete on the national and international market. High productivity indicates the high effectiveness of the agricultural sector of the Opole region. The proportion of products coming from large commercial farms as a percentage of the trade production of all farms in the region is very high – 87%, which is 14% more than the national average [*Raport o Rozwoju Społecznym...*, 2000, 25]. Although the productivity of agricultural production in the region is high, there is a lack of enterprises active in the sphere of the agricultural-grocery market. The proportion of farms carrying out non-agricultural activities is also small. This percentage is only 7.2%, which is lower than the national average. There is also variation in the concentration of agricultural and non-agricultural activity in the Opole region. The proportion of Sector I (agricultural) enterprises as a percentage of the total number of enterprises registered in the REGON system is highest in the north and the south – west of the region. These areas are the ones characterised by the highest concentration of agricultural activities in the region. A similar spatial

³This report presents problems regarding the economic development of rural areas and describes regional differences in the factors of rural development. A description of the regional differences in human potential, living standards and the level of technical and social infrastructure is included.

concentration is observed when we consider the number of agricultural enterprises registered per 1000 inhabitants. In this case, however, the north – west part of the region has a significantly higher number of agricultural enterprises per 1000 inhabitants than the rest of the region. In other parts of the region there is a low number of agricultural enterprises (between 1 and 3 enterprises per 1000 inhabitants).

Without doubt, the natural conditions, farming tradition and demographic potential all favour rural development, including agricultural production. Due to these conditions it is accepted that one of the best opportunities for regional development lies in multi-functional rural development, together with the development of agriculture. In the report entitled "*Strategia Rozwoju Województwa Opolskiego*" (*Development Strategies for the Opole Region*) it is stated that economic development of the Opole region should be based on its great knowledge and tradition of farming, high production and social potential, as well as the attractive terrain available for agro-tourism and tourism. The region does possess some weak points hindering development, namely the inadequate number of food processing enterprises, producer groups and active organisations working on behalf of the farming community. Multi-functional development of rural areas, together with the advanced level of agricultural production, is seen to be a great opportunity for the development of the region. However, the agricultural system needs modernisation and restructuring. Among the eight major directions of development in the Opole region mentioned, the following two were stressed: effective agriculture and modernisation of rural areas. The realisation of these two goals is to be based on the traditions, willingness to work and innovativeness of the inhabitants of the Opole region. The "Rural Renewal" programme will support agricultural development.

One of the strategic goals enabling the realisation of the priorities for the development of the region is the restructuring of agriculture and transformation of the food processing sector, together with the multi-functional development of rural areas and small towns. This is aimed at transforming agriculture and adapting it to the needs of European co-operation and enabling rural areas to adapt to the new conditions on the employment market and competition on a national and international scale. The actions aimed at achieving the major goals of development are meant to lead to: agricultural-food products of high quality which are a trademark for the region, strong and specialised farms, as well as increasing the earnings of farmers. According to the assumptions of local politicians this is possible through supporting the development of infrastructure in the sphere of storing and processing agricultural products, improving the structure of the agricultural sector, promoting the activi-

ties of non-governmental organisations working on behalf of the agricultural sector and realising the "Rural Renewal" programme. Agro-tourism, together with small firms involved in production and crafts, is expected to play a major role in the creation of new jobs [*Strategia Rozwoju Województwa...*, 1999].

It remains for us to hope that the goals and tasks included in the strategy for the development of the region will be realised to a large extent. This requires that every economic and political "actor" in the Opole region should bear responsibility for rural development. Many inhabitants of the region are at present active in the realisation of the "Rural Renewal" programme, supported by initiatives from local government. Increasing the rate of rural development is, however, dependent on the expenditure of local government in this field. The present low level of expenditure in this area is a barrier to making use of the potential lying within the region. Another necessary condition for rural development is the elaboration of a marketing strategy, which would promote rural areas as areas favourable to investment in economic enterprises.

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