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## RURAL YOUTH'S NARRATIVES ABOUT THEIR LIFE STRATEGIES

Danka MORAVČÍKOVÁ\*, Eva PECHOČIAKOVÁ SVITAČOVÁ, Anna MRAVCOVÁ

Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra, Slovak Republic

The paper presents results of the research project Social and Moral Aspects of Economic and Civic Life of Rural Youth, which was supported by the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic, through the Slovak Youth Institute under the specific scheme Support and Development of Research in the Field of Youth Policy. With the focus on the problems of contemporary life of rural youth, it emphasizes socio-economic and civic-politic dimension of its life. It maps different aspects as well as the influence of particular factors and institutions that affect behaviour and choices of young people in rural areas. The research methodology was based on qualitative approach using observation and personal semi-standardized interview method during the field survey. Interviews were conducted with 106 young people aged 18–30 from 39 rural communities localized in different parts of Slovakia in 2014. Besides introduction to the context, the authors describe methodological framework and the sampling procedure, the key research goals and questions, and basic research findings. They conclude that rural youth needs to be given certain stimulus and support in all possible areas of existence and participation, as well as tolerance and acceptance of their new ideas and thoughts.

**Keywords:** rural youth; life strategies; value orientation; civic engagement

In contemporary society, young people living in rural areas represent a specific group that raises a number of pressing issues. For most rural communities in Slovakia (but also in other European countries), the most pressing problem is the so-called exodus of young generations. This exodus of young people from rural areas is influenced by several factors, for example, by geographical location, social circumstances, the level and availability of services, the local labour market, the value of family and local social networks, etc. An important and significant role in these migration trends also belongs to the intrinsic heterogeneity of the current rural areas, offering diverse perspectives to the youth. In the conditions of Slovakia, on one side, it has the form of communities traditionally oriented on agriculture or the form of marginalized deindustrialized areas. On the other hand, it has the form of more prosperous (mainly suburban) locations characterized by a focus on trade and services that enable “more consumerist” way of life. Therefore, socialization of rural youth should be seen as a process that does not have a uniform appearance and conduct, but it takes place in different social environments. In connection with the issue of rural youth, the question “How to define it?” raises firstly. Age and location are two key characteristics when trying to define rural youth. Statistically, youth is most frequently considered as the population in the age between 15 and 29 years. According to the demographic data of the European Commission (2015), almost 90 million young people aged between 15 and 29 years live in the European Union<sup>1</sup>. The statistical information

about young people in rural areas of Europe is rather poor, as it is rarely available below NUTS2 level<sup>2</sup>.

Some sociologists have argued that we are living in the era of “late modernity” and in “risk society” (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991) and our ability to survive is less dependent on traditional institutions (e.g. family, church), and more and more dependent on impersonal institutions like labour market and welfare state. (Beck, 2000) Other authors highlight the fact that “young people frequently attempt to resolve collective problems through individual action and hold themselves responsible for their inevitable failure... and there is a much greater range of pathways to choose from...” (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997) As for the locality, it is necessary to emphasize that the rural area (in Slovakia, too) is usually very diversified and heterogeneous. Other literature sources also demonstrate and engage with the diversity and heterogeneity of rural youth (Pini et al., 2016). Therefore, socialization of rural youth should be seen as a process that does not have a uniform appearance and conduct, but it takes place in different social environments. “Youth and adulthood diverged from age categories, then from social roles and relevant lifestyles, and finally from psychological and development characteristics. The transition from the phase of youth (denoting the status

1 This represents around 18% of the total population of EU-28. The proportion of young people in the total population varies across countries. While it is comparatively smaller in Greece, Spain, Italy, Portugal and Slovenia, it reaches the highest levels in Cyprus, Malta, and Slovakia.

2 Simultaneously with this data, monitoring reports also highlight the differences in unemployment of urban and rural youth. In most European countries, youth unemployment rates are around twice as high as those recorded among adults. Researchers have highlighted significant associations between long-term youth unemployment and processes of socio-economic marginalization (Cartmel and Furlong, 2000). The rural youth unemployment rate (2012) was above 50% in Spain and Greece; over 30% in Portugal, Italy, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Ireland, Lithuania, Latvia; over 25% in Hungary and Poland. In Netherlands it is 7%, Germany 6%, Austria 5% (Shucksmith, 2013).

of a dependent person, not treated seriously and incapable of deciding about oneself) to adulthood (designating the status of a society member with full rights, capable of taking independent decisions) is of a great subjective importance to young people – it provides them with the feeling of independence and autonomy” (Szafraniec, 2011).

## Material and methods

The research was based on qualitative approach using observation and personal interview method as data collection methods. The target group was young people aged 18–30 living in rural municipalities in various parts of Slovakia. The main research questions were to map out the extent to which young people perceive a rural area as a space linked to opportunities to do business in various fields; what is their motivation to engage in economic activities and in the socio-cultural and civic life of a rural community. Other aims were to find out while doing so, what is the role of interrelatedness with environment, individual benefit, awareness of the necessity of rural development and improving the quality of life of rural population and so on. The research was also well focused on describing the impact of institutions (school, family and kinship, neighbourhood, politics, religion) that form and develop economic thinking of young people and except of professional competencies they also lead them to the acquisition of certain social and moral competencies.

In the preparatory phase of the research project, the technique of focus groups was used, which served as the initial source for the preparation of the scenario of semi-standardized interviews. Personal interviews were conducted with 106 young people from 39 rural communities localized in different parts of Slovakia by random selection method among three age categories (18–19 years, 20–24 years and 25–29/30 years), different socio-economic categories (student, entrepreneur, employee, unemployed, woman on maternity leave, etc.) and with different marital status (single, married, divorced). Rural communities were categorized into three groups: (i) suburbanized larger municipalities (12 municipalities, average size about 3,000 inhabitants); (ii) developing medium-sized municipalities (14 municipalities, average size about 2,000 inhabitants); (iii) marginal, mostly small municipalities (13 municipalities, average size about 1,000 inhabitants). Selection of municipalities was random and mainly based on personal recommendations and personal contacts of researchers (snowball sampling), and a purposeful (arbitrary) selection of the research sample was also used. Semi-standardized interviews were conducted with open-ended informal questions and discussions. Content analysis was used to analyze the transcribed field data. The data and information obtained from observation, interviews and other supporting materials were pooled together and organized into analytic themes reflecting the topic of the study, research questions as well as used concepts.

## Results and discussion

### Life strategies: “Should I stay or should I go...?”

Young people having a feeling of biological and intellectual adulthood simultaneously accompanied by a feeling of

lack of economic and social independence, tend to shape specific subcultures and particular social identities. This is often conditional to the behaviour of the older generation, what is more significantly reflected in more conservative rural environment and usually raises hidden and explicit intergenerational conflicts. In relation to rural areas, young people especially highlighted the direct contact with nature, peaceful and less stressful environment, better housing, feeling of security, strong social networks, the possibility of sports, hiking etc. However, it was often noted that there are not enough interesting activities for them in the rural areas (*“There’s nothing to do.”*), and the poor transport connections, poor economic conditions and lack of “good” job opportunities were pointed out. They felt too excessive isolation (*“It’s such a backwater.”*; *“Village is like a dying, all young people are leaving...”*), insufficient civilization infrastructure, poor access to quality education and leisure activities and they were also bothered by “pervasive” social control (*“Everyone knows everyone and everyone knows everything about you!”*).

In the context of modern rural development, young people are naturally becoming the hope. It is expected that they are the ones who contribute to the fact that Slovak countryside will become a space for rest and relax as well as a space, which will give inhabitants more opportunities to fulfil themselves and find a job there. However, the effort to keep young people in rural areas as one of the objectives of rural development can very easily come into conflict with the goals of youth policy, employment policy and social inclusion that are to expand the possibilities and opportunities for how to become ‘needed in the market’ for the young generation. Better education usually means the necessity to leave rural community because of limited opportunities at the local rural labour market, although many young people want to stay in rural areas. Moreover, it raises a number of complicated issues, for example, what stand should society and local communities take to migration of rural youth? Is it possible to see it just as a ‘bury’ of chances to reproduction and development of rural communities or is it necessary to classify it as an expression of emancipation and abilities of young people to take the opportunity and become independent?

The most appropriate way how to solve this dilemma would probably be to support both options – i.e., “stay”, but also “go”. Support of so-called leak could in practice mean the availability of all necessary information that young people from rural areas will need in a situation where he/she finds himself/herself outside his/her social networks in a competitive market environment, which can act on them daunting. On the contrary, so-called support of staying in the rural area should entail the material and financial support, which would on one hand balance the availability of relevant educational institutions also for rural youth (support of travel and residency costs), but on the other, it would help create job positions with a corresponding evaluation for people with higher formal qualification and also help the municipalities to meet their housing requirements.

### Economic perspectives and values: modernization and/or tradition

How do young people from the rural environment see their economic strategies? In the hierarchy according to frequency, the visions of respondents about the economic

future have been associated primarily with well-paid jobs, good jobs, studies and entrepreneurship, too. Only a tenth of those surveyed associate their future entrepreneurship. Whereas the part of survey sample was also the category of people aged 18–19 years, it is understandable that visions of the future in this group of rural youth are to some extent influenced by their current social status, i.e. preference of education and continuous preparation for future employment. Approximately a tenth of respondents could not imagine their future, they did not think about it, or they did not think about issues related to the economic strategies. There were also those for whom the future associates concern (*"What will be in the future? I do not know. Both me, and my husband have fixed-term contracts, husband works in the cooperative. Whenever the contract ends, we do not know if we get it extended or not. So... We are afraid of what can happen."*) When indicating factors complicating the employment, respondents distinguish precisely between lack of job opportunities and the absence of good (quality) job positions. Serious obstacles, according to the respondents, were lack of courage, lack of the necessary capital, lack of ideas, small and insolvent market, distance from the town and others. Generally, identified barriers had both subjective and objective character that was reflecting the diversity of examined environment.

Modernization trends in various areas of life are intensively perceived also by rural youth what is the reason why this young people undergo certain changes in value orientations in comparison to traditional ones. The importance of the family as the traditional value for their past, present and future life was declared by almost all respondents. However, they did not expect permanent provision of economic background from their families. Respondents' answers also confirmed strong social bonds with other members of the extended family, where rural youth predominantly finds out 'space' to meet their social and emotional needs. The research revealed that traditionally strong neighbourly relations in rural areas are considerably weakened at present. Even more, in many cases they actually discontinued and were not renewed. (*"With the neighbours, I only say hello and that's all."*) It was possible to notice certain level of "closeness" of individuals and families, as well as weakened trust to other inhabitants in a municipality. This can be explained either by intensifying individualization of life in rural areas, by deepening social inequalities, different interests, ideas or by lifestyles of individuals, families and social groups. While physical work (especially) was considered as the highest value in the past in rural areas, the current rural youth is particularly interested in the work that enables self-realization and is well rewarded. Although respondents did not indicate whether they use financial evaluation to meet their own needs exclusively, the work means to them especially material value enabling them to ensure their own existence, to have a good life and to develop. (*"Money ... money, money and money..."*) Even though material or financial importance of work prevailed, young people associated the work with self-realization and personal development as well. They also perceived it as an activity that allows them life in the context with other social groups.

Values and life of young people in rural municipalities greatly affect the "we feeling" with the local community and spatial identity as well. "To trust people, to feel save

and to be appreciated are important for young people, and enhance their feeling of being valued and respected in the community environment, as well as increasing their opportunities to be active and involved in community life as independent individuals" (Fabiansson, 2006). Surveyed young rural inhabitants had predominantly positive attitude towards their municipalities, some of them might be even described as "local patriots". Though, as a matter of course most of respondents expected more convenient living and working conditions in the urban environment. Many of them indicated that they would like to stay in rural areas, but at the same time they are aware of the fact that they can find employment in their profession only in town. Another part of the respondents emphasized that they will often and gladly come back to their municipality, even though they will live elsewhere. On the other hand, young people from more marginal and smaller localities (despite expressed feelings of settlement identity) almost consistently stated that they do not perceive municipality as perspective in terms of its further development. The influence of category/type of municipality was mostly reflected at these statements.

#### Political and civic participation: inclusion vs exclusion, passivity vs activity

Youth policy in Slovakia has undergone big changes during past 20 years. It would be biased to say that the membership in the EU would not have an impact on this situation. Contrariwise reporting obligations created the conditions and platform for discussions, networking and looking for common solutions especially relating to the main topics as volunteering, participation and information (Macháček, 2014). Rural youth research shows that most respondents do not consider political rights in their lives with appropriate seriousness. It is even possible to state that young people put their political and civic participation to the margin of their interests. To a large extent, it was reduced only to option of voting in elections. This may be related to the fact that youth perceive the right to vote as privilege of adulthood. Therefore, with the proper measure of pride, especially in the early years of crossing the border adulthood, they use this right. A few respondents considered the election as wholly irrelevant (*"In my life, I have not participated in any election, nor am I tempted to do so and I do not even know how to vote, only theoretically. I think that on the one hand it is a mistake, because I just blame the system, but on the other hand, those who get into parliament have totally different, higher living standards, take only for themselves and I cannot affect it somehow. Politics affects me only in terms of expenditure."*) There were even answers where respondents openly admit that although they participated in the elections, it was not so much on their initiative, but rather the pressure of their closest social environment, especially the family. (*"Since I have the right vote, I attended all elections. My parents care about the vote and the vote to be used."*) Some respondents reported the possibility of their active participation at the local, perhaps regional politics, but firmly rejected the central level. From this, it can be concluded that rural youth is aware of the importance of political rights. At the same time, either from individual experience or experience through the media and the environment, young people often create a negative view on central politics level and subsequently refuse closer participation in it, often without

any efforts of trying to assess the situation by themselves. Involvement or rather ignorance of rural youth in public affairs is often linked to the fact that young people spend minimal time in the municipalities. Usually it is because they study or work in another municipality/town and so they have no opportunity to actively participate in public affairs and use their rights. Some respondents openly admitted active participation in political rights either by the meetings for a particular current purpose (demonstrations, petitions, etc.) or by being members in various associations dealing with public affairs. They often presented their previous attempts to directly perform local policy and so to actively create life in the society they live in, or at least expressed their aspiration to achieve such objectives in the near future.

Generally, the opinion that the youth is the bearer of change, it is radical and dissatisfied with the status quo, revolutionary etc. prevails. However, our research did not confirm this, since most of those surveyed answered they are more or less satisfied with management of municipalities. Feeling of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with local politics was strongly conditioned by the personality of the mayor, while slight majority of respondents was satisfied with the local environment politics. Respondents felt the need for gradual change largely because from their point of view, a mayor or a council does not lead a municipality well, or because of a general need for generational change of representatives of local government. When asked how the possible change should be realized, respondents said it should be a gradual process and options for radical change were preferred by only a few respondents.

### Conclusions

Nowadays, young people (including those living in rural areas) grow up and live in a globalized and rapidly developing information and consumer society. Therefore, their integration into a rural community is a multidimensional issue requiring multidisciplinary approach, as in the case of social sciences. On one hand, young people living in rural areas perceive the positive aspects of rural life and feel residential identity. On the other hand, they adapt their behaviour to prevailing patterns that are 'imposed' to them by contemporary society and way of life. That is why it is necessary to understand that their life visions and strategies are not unrealistic or unrealizable.

What should be done is to achieve much higher rate of participation in public affairs, whether in the form of youth cultural events, by participating in cultivation of the environment, or by activities of various clubs operating on behalf of municipal councils etc. (Moravčíková et al., 2012). Life strategies and aspirations of young people are conditioned by both economic and social factors. In the visions of the economic future, the most frequent answers were well-paid jobs, good jobs, then studies and eventually entrepreneurship. Although the surveyed young people declared first of all material or financial dimension of work, they also understood work as an activity through which they can better integrate into lives of wider communities and society. When dealing with the place and value of the political rights in the lives of rural youth in Slovakia, it is possible to conclude that young people, despite the sceptical assumption, still leave a place for certain value of political rights and their implementation, even though most of those surveyed ones limit their active

participation in political rights just to the active voting right. Other political rights such as freedom of assembly, the petition right or the right to be elected, represent mostly just marginal values of life for the majority of respondents.

In conclusion, it is necessary to emphasize that young people cannot be seen as a target group only in connection with the future rural development. It is necessary to understand them 'here and now' as a really existing group which may significantly contribute to the development of rural communities. Studies from different parts of the world highlight the need for the government and relevant authorities to take into account various issues raised by rural youth to ensure that their voices are heard (e.g. Hassan et al., 2016). However, to do so, young people need to be given certain stimulus and support in all possible areas of existence and participation, as well as tolerance and acceptance of their new ideas and thoughts.

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