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Quality of life in the countryside after Poland's accession to the European Union

INTRODUCTION

Quality of life is defined as the degree of satisfaction of both financial and non-financial needs, i.e. the fulfilment of standards or values, whether biological, psychological, social, political, cultural, economic and ecological, of individuals, families and communities. It is a term from many fields of science, including but not limited to economy, psychology, medicine and sociology, so its interpretations vary. Quality of life is characterised primarily by the income situation of households and by how their needs are satisfied (expenses), as well as by the level and quality of nutrition, housing conditions, household equipment, access to modern transportation technologies, education of children, participation in culture, leisure and the labour market, and use of welfare benefits, services and the healthcare system. The degree of poverty and social exclusion is also taken into account. Each of the aforesaid factors has its objective dimension but is also described in subjective categories. In the recent years, there has been a tendency to ascribe a greater significance to subjective factors. The structure of needs and how they are satisfied may differ for the same income. After all, needs are

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influenced by the environment and they depend on subjective preferences of the consumer. This explains for instance the differences between the quality of life in the countryside and in the city (Borys, 2015; Czapiński, Panek, 2015; Golinowska, 2011; Bendowska, Bieńkuńska, Luty, Sobiestjański, Wójcik, 2015; Panek, 2015; Szukiełojć-Bieńkuńska, 2015). Rural areas have poorer technical, transport and housing infrastructure than cities, and worse access to services and modern technologies. On the other hand, the countryside has unique natural environment and landscapes. They represent resources *per se* and are of significance for the comfort of life in the countryside and as such for social well-being. Those values of rural areas are not always appreciated (Zegar, 2015).

The purpose of this paper is to assess the changes in the quality of life of people in the countryside after Poland's accession to the European Union. The research was based on the results of the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) study and on a household budgets study by CSO (Polish Central Statistical Office). The choice of the component factors characterising the quality of life in the Polish countryside was based on the subject areas adopted by CSO and depended on the availability of data. The quality of life of the rural population was evaluated based on indicators characterising objective living conditions (income, expenses, infrastructure, housing conditions and household equipment) and on a subjective assessment. The basic factors are related to either people or households. The assessment of the quality of life did not take into account the environment and the climate-related values of rural areas.

INCOME LEVEL AND STRUCTURE

Income is the basic factor determining the quality of life of household members. It is an economic guarantee that needs will be satisfied. An average inhabitant of the countryside has income higher than the income of farming families but lower than the income of an average inhabitant of a city or town. In the post-accession period (2006³–2016), the advantage of the income of the rural population over that of the farming population dropped from 34% to 28%. The income relationship between the countryside and urban areas improved. At the beginning of the period studied, the income of the rural population constituted 64% of the income of the inhabitants of cities and towns, while at the end of that period the figure was 72%. The income-related disproportions differed depending on the size of the city or town, with the greatest disproportions recorded in the most populous cities and the smallest – in those with the fewest inhabitants (Table 1).

³ The first year of full results of studies regarding the income and living conditions of the population, developed according to the EU-SILC (*European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions*, 2008).

Table 1. Mean annual nominal household disposable income per capita in PLN

Year	Country Total	City/Town						Countryside	Farmers
		Total	with a population of (in thousand)						
			500 and more	499–200	199–100	99–20	below 20		
2006	9764	11335	15078	11315	11117	10618	9186	7247	5402
2007	10576	12204	16465	12508	11327	11415	9867	8007	6255
2008	12164	13975	18879	14760	13576	12721	11231	9306	8008
2009	13681	15795	21939	16549	15601	13956	12912	10375	8134
2010	14442	16626	22220	16600	16828	15346	13753	11063	8871
2011	15110	18279	23914	19398	17507	17075	15203	12284	9283
2012	15875	18279	23914	19398	17507	17075	15203	12284	9804
2013	16349	18698	24103	19579	19247	17425	15555	12908	10147
2014	16922	19447	25126	20241	19569	18186	16288	13227	10193
2015	17402	19867	26234	20456	19979	18599	16637	13805	10471
2016	18126	20464	27056	20786	20408	19056	17534	14650	11440

Source: own compilation based on: (*Dochody i warunki życia ...*, consecutive years).

The post-accession improvement of income in the countryside versus the urban population resulted primarily from the higher dynamic of the nominal increase of disposable income in the countryside by 102%, with 112% for families living mainly off farming, while the mean increase in the cities/towns was lower – 81% (Figure 1).

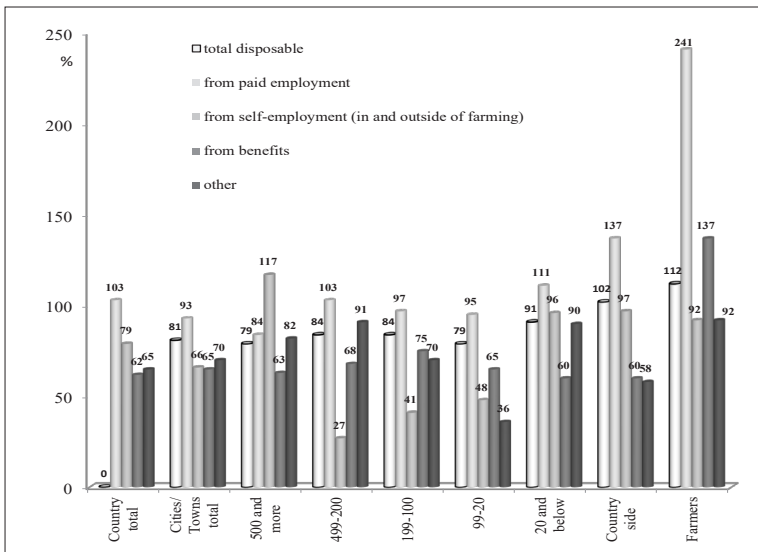


Figure 1. Disposable income increase by income sources in 2016 versus 2006 in percentage (2006 = 100)

Source: own compilation based on: as in Table 1.

The high growth dynamic for farming families resulted mostly from the financial support granted to farms under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). On the other hand, the lower growth dynamic in cities and towns was most likely caused by labour migration. Those who come to big cities in search of work usually find poorly paid menial jobs.

The basic source of income in the countryside is paid employment. In the income structure of households in the countryside, the share of income from paid employment is the highest, increasing from 48.7 to 57.0% between 2006 and 2016. The share of the income from self-employment (in and outside of farming) remained similar (12.4 and 12.1%), while the share of income from welfare dropped considerably – from 37.4 to 29.6% (Figure 2).

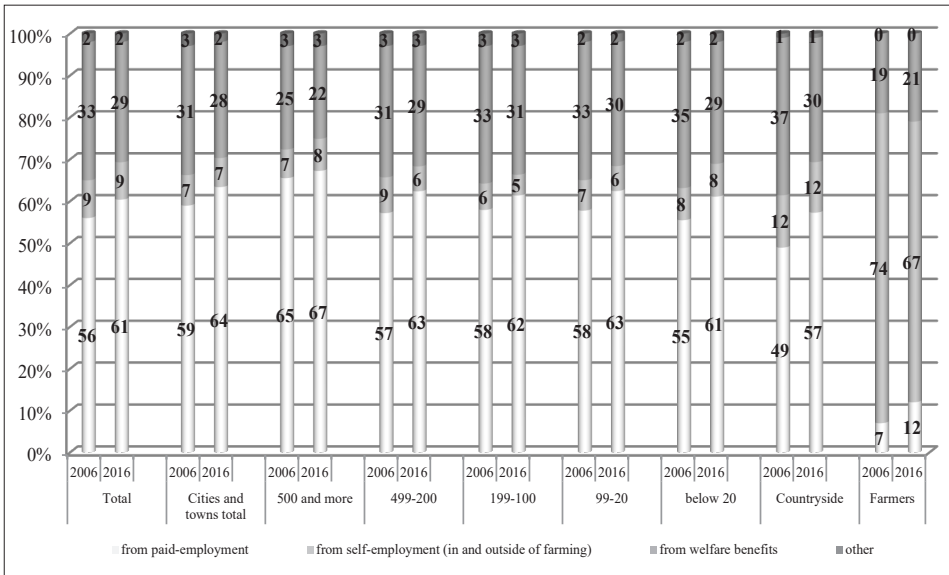


Figure 2. Structure of household disposable income by source of income in 2006 and 2016 in percentage

Source: own compilation based on: as in Table 1.

In the families of farmers, on the other hand, where work in agriculture is the primary source of income, the share of income from farming dropped from 74.0 to 67.3%, while income from paid employment grew from 7.3 to 11.8% and from welfare benefits from 18.4 to 20.6%.

The income structure of an average urban household is dominated by income from paid employment. Its share grew from 59.3 to 63.5%, while income from self-employment (in and outside of farming) dropped from 7.3 to 6.7% and from welfare benefits from 30.9 to 28.2%.

The growth trend regarding income from paid employment in the structure of income of the rural population is permanent. It is also reinforced by migration from cities to the countryside⁴ – not only of retired people but increasingly often of representatives of liberal professions and managers – people employed in cities, often having high income.

Permanent employment, which depends on the situation in the labour market, is an important factor determining the quality of life not only of an individual but of a whole family. Despite the post-accession improvement in the labour market, the countryside still notes high unemployment. “According to LFS (Labour Force Survey), unemployment in the fourth quarter of 2016 was 958,000 people, with 422,000 countryside inhabitants and 536,000 people from cities and towns. The unemployed from rural areas represented 44% of the unemployed, which means that their share was higher than that of professionally active or inactive. This resulted in a higher unemployment rate in the countryside. The unemployment rate in the fourth quarter of 2016 was 6.1% in the countryside and 5.1% in urban areas. Even though the trends in the labour market are usually similar for the unemployed in the countryside and in cities and towns, inhabitants of rural areas are at a greater risk of unemployment – due to the lower rate of changes in the countryside. The less flexible rural labour market makes unemployment in the countryside more lasting than in cities and towns” (*Stan i struktura...*, 2017).

LEVEL AND STRUCTURE OF HOUSEHOLD EXPENSES

Between 2006 and 2016, the general level of nominal expenses increased: in the countryside by 54.5%, in farming families by 42.0% and in cities and towns by 51.2%, which means that the differences between the countryside and cities/towns as to the quality of life persist (Table 2).

In the period studied, the total expenses of an average person in the countryside were lower than in cities and towns, and they constituted 72–74% of the expenses of an average inhabitant of an urban area. The expense disproportions depended on the size of the city/town. The relationship slightly improved when compared to the largest cities and dropped just a little when compared to the smallest towns: the expenses of the rural population represented 55–59% of the expenses in cities with a population of 500,000 and bigger and 86–83% in towns below 20,000 people. In 2006, the expenses of an average inhabitant of the countryside were higher than expenses of farming families by 5%, and by 2016 that difference grew to 14%.

⁴ Between 2005 and 2016, rural population increased by 566,800; in 2016, the positive migration balance in the countryside was 25,000 (*Rocznik Statystyczny...*, 2017).

Table 2. Average monthly household expenses per capita in PLN depending on the place of living between 2006 and 2016

Year	Country Total	Cities/Towns					Countryside	Farmers	
		Total	with a population of (in thousand)						
			500 and more	499–200	199–100	99–20			below 20
Average monthly household expenses per capita in PLN									
2006	745	834	1102	897	772	750	701	602	574
2007	810	908	1205	964	866	817	747	653	615
2008	904	1010	1365	1034	984	891	855	735	694
2009	957	1070	1488	1083	1042	963	869	775	712
2010	991	1107	1528	1124	1050	1007	916	806	757
2011	1015	1133	1518	1162	1081	1028	959	825	736
2012	1051	1174	1581	1205	1117	1058	988	859	785
2013	1062	1183	1582	1210	1112	1087	992	873	785
2014	1079	1211	1615	1244	1172	1110	992	874	799
2015	1091	1225	1624	1265	1194	1100	1030	883	779
2016	1132	1261	1588	1306	1228	1141	1114	930	815

Source: developed based on (*Budżety...*, consecutive years).

To assess how much the household members satisfied their needs, their average disposable income⁵ was compared to the average total monthly expenses, and their food expenses were compared to their total expenses. The percentage of food expenses is treated as one of the most important determinants of prosperity as it tells us about the satisfaction of the basic needs and about the quality of life. The biggest part of the disposable income was spent on the satisfaction of needs by the inhabitants of rural areas, and the smallest – by people from the biggest cities and by farmers.

The total expenses of the rural population in 2006 represented 94.8% of disposable income, dropping to 78.7% by 2016. The expenses of urban citizens represented 92.0 and 79.7% respectively, with the lowest expenses recorded for farmers: 85.7 and 72.6%. Food expenses had the biggest share in the total expenses in farming families (35.2 and 31.5%), a smaller share in rural families (32.0 and 28.6%), and the smallest in urban families (24.9 and 22.6%).

⁵ The benchmarking data regarding disposable income and expenses are sourced from *Household budget survey* because the level of disposable income published in *Incomes and living conditions of the population of Poland (report from the EU-SILC survey)* slightly differs from the disposable income published in *Household budget survey*. EU-SILC, on the other hand, does not publish expenses, which is why the same source of data, i.e. *Household budget survey*, was used to compare disposable income and expenses.

The high share of expenses in income and share of food expenses in the total money allocated for the satisfaction of needs shows that households are left with little funds for savings and major investment planning. The higher share of total expenses in income and share of food expenses in total expenses in the countryside than in cities/towns points to a lower quality of life of the rural population when compared with urban areas.

In the post-accession period, the expense relationship between the countryside and urban areas was found to differ depending on specific needs (Figure 3). The rural population and farming families spent more of their total expenses on food, clothes, shoes, transport and communications – the basic needs. A smaller share of their expenses was devoted to higher-level needs, especially education, recreation and culture. The disproportions between the countryside and cities/towns as to expenses on clothes, housing (equipment and upkeep), transport and communications, recreation and culture, and restaurants and hotels reduced between 2006 and 2016.

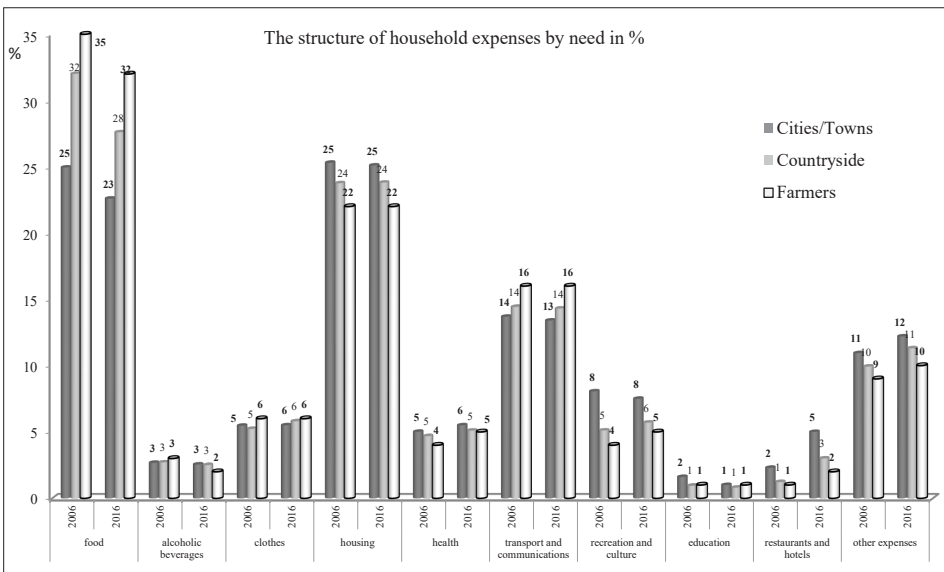


Figure 3. Diversification of and changes in the structure of household expenses for specific needs in the countryside, cities and towns in 2006 and 2016

Source: as in the Table 2.

The changes in the income to expenses relationship suggest that between 2006 and 2016 the quality of life in the countryside versus urban areas improved. In spite of this, inequalities to the disadvantage of the rural population are still substantial in many areas of life – as visible for instance in the expenses on education, recreation and culture, and restaurants and hotels.

As far as families living off farming are concerned, it is hard to draw any satisfactory conclusions about the greater prosperity of that group despite its lowest share of expenses in income since in farming families the consumption-related goals of the household compete with the production-related objectives of the farm and so such families may limit the expenses intended for the needs of the household (Chmielewska, 2013).

HOUSING

The housing situation (the use and equipment of dwellings) of rural and urban populations is an important contributing factor to the quality of life. If dwellings are in a poor condition and poorly equipped, this lowers the quality of life. And the other way round – good housing conditions that meet the criteria of their users are usually a source of satisfaction and positive assessment of the quality of life.

In Poland, the majority of farming families (over 90%) and rural families (over 80%) live in detached houses that have running water (cold and hot), a bathroom with a bathtub or a shower, a toilet with a flush and a gas system (more often from gas cylinders than from the grid). About 5% of the rural population live in terraced houses, while the remaining 11–13% lives in buildings with several flats⁶ (Table 3).

In the countryside, in the period analysed, the percentage of families living in one-family detached or terraced houses increased, though slightly, while the percentage of those living in multi-flat houses dropped. The growing interest in moving out of the city to a detached or terraced house is connected with the scale of urbanisation in rural areas. Such housing is connected with the fact that new buildings in housing estates are provided with water sewage, gas and road infrastructure. Subsequently, the rest of the village often connects to such infrastructure. As a result, the urbanisation of rural areas has helped improve the quality of life of the rural population in terms of the housing comfort. Still, the percentage of dwellings with “full” water, sewage and gas infrastructure is lower in the countryside than in cities and towns, especially in terms of connections to the grid. More households use local systems and gas cylinders in the countryside.

Another generally recognised quality of life indicator is the presence of durable goods in households, such as a phone, colour TV, dishwasher, automatic washing machine, microwave oven and car (Table 3).

⁶ In the EU-SILC study results, the Polish Central Statistical Office specifies only a one-family detached house as the place of living of farmers. In 2006, 95.7% of farming families lived in such houses, while in 2016 – 95.3%.

Table 3. Selected data about the housing situation and durable goods in households in urban areas and in the countryside

Item	Percentage of households			
	City/town		Countryside	
	2006	2016	2006	2016
Housing situation				
Single-family detached house	18.6	23.1	81.2	83.8
Single-family terraced house	4.5	5.2	4.8	5.1
Multi-flat buildings	76.7	71.5	13.5	11.0
Tap with running cold water	99.2	99.7	93.1	98.0
Toilet with a flush	95.8	98.1	81.8	94.2
Bathroom with a bathtub or shower	94.0	97.3	81.8	93.7
Hot running water from the grid	40.0	41.5	3.4	2.3
Hot running water heated locally	54.8	56.6	77.9	92.0
Gas from the grid	74.8	70.9	19.2	21.7
Gas from cylinders	19.3	19.6	72.6	71.5
Durable goods in households				
Landline phone	77.7	90.1 ^b	66.6	90.3 ^b
Mobile phone	72.8		66.5	
Colour TV	97.2	96.3	96.1	98.4
Satellite or cable TV ^a	58.6	77.4 ^c	29.1	66.1 ^c
Computer	49.3	76.6	34.3	72.5
Internet connection	35.0	73.5	15.1	66.2 ^c
Dishwasher	9.3	35.3	5.4	32.3
Fridge	97.1	98.6 ^c	96.5	98.9 ^c
Automatic washing machine	86.7	98.4	68.3	97.6
Car	47.4	63.1	57.4	75.3

^a. A device to receive satellite or cable TV. ^b. Landline and mobile phone jointly. ^c. In 2014.

Source: own compilation based on (*Dochody i warunki życia ...*, 2008; *Dochody i warunki życia ...*, 2017).

The highest presence of durable goods, especially those more modern or prestigious (home cinema system, a DVD player) is noted in urban households. On the other hand, farming and rural families have more traditional equipment (landline phone, refrigerator) or equipment highly useful for the household, such as a car, which is the basic means of transport in the countryside. Some amenities, such as a device to receive satellite TV or cable TV signal or an Internet connection, have a higher presence in cities and towns than in the countryside mostly as a result of the different population density in those areas. The diversity in the presence of durable goods may also depend on the financial situation. For example, 4.9% of rural households in 2016 stated that they did not have a computer because they could not afford it (versus 4.1% in urban areas).

The quality of life in the countryside as measured by changes in the presence of durable goods in households improved after the accession. The percentage of rural and farming households with Internet access, satellite and cable TV and new-generation durable goods increased.

SUBJECTIVE ASSESSMENT OF THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL SITUATION OF HOUSEHOLDS

Subjective factors substantially contribute to the overall assessment of the quality of life. After the accession, people in the countryside were less optimistic about their financial standing than inhabitants of urban areas. Difficulties with the financing of the basic needs were more frequent in the countryside than in cities or towns. In 2006, as many as 85.6% of rural households (versus 70.4% in 2016), 81.9% of farmers (versus 64.7% in 2016) and 76.0% of urban inhabitants (versus 59.3% in 2016) declared that they found it hard⁷ to “make ends meet” with their current income. Despite the improvement, the percentage of households, both in rural and urban areas, whose income was insufficient to satisfy their basic needs was high. Only 14.2% of rural households (versus 29.5% in 2016), 17.6% of farmers (versus 33.3% in 2016) and 24.2% urban inhabitants (versus 40.7% in 2016) found it easy⁸ to “make ends meet”. Despite the growth, both in the countryside and in cities and towns, the percentage of households that “made ends meet” easily was low (Figure 4).

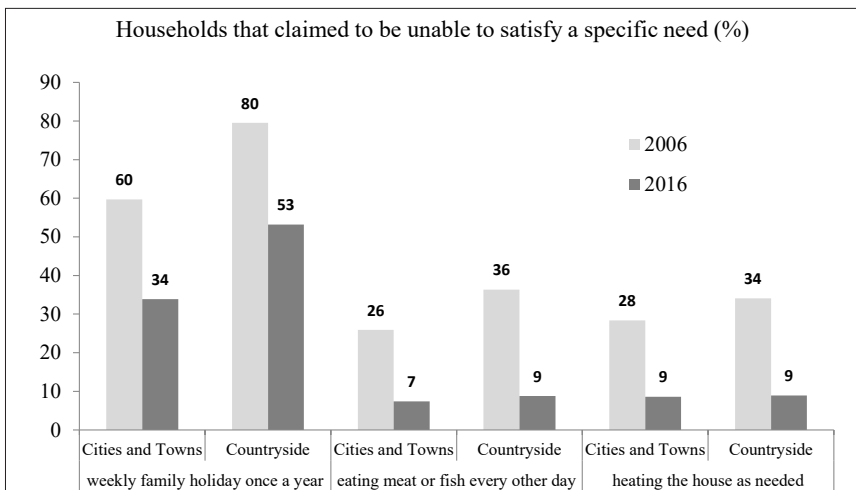


Figure 4. Households that had trouble satisfying selected needs

Source: own compilation based on: (*Dochody i warunki życia...*, 2008; *Dochody i warunki życia...*, 2017).

⁷ The total of three levels of difficulty: “very hard,” “hard” and “somewhat hard.”

⁸ The total of three levels: “quite easy,” “easy” and “very easy.”

Rural inhabitants found it harder than people in cities/towns to be able to satisfy selected needs. A subjective assessment of the satisfaction of other selected needs is presented in Figure 4. For example, in 2006, as many as 80% (versus 53% in 2016) of households in the countryside could not afford an one week family holiday once a year, with only 60% such households in cities and towns (versus 34% in 2016). An analysis of the level of satisfaction of needs shows that the rural population had a worse subjective perception of its quality of life than urban population.

THE PRESENCE OF TECHNICAL INFRASTRUCTURE IN RURAL AREAS

Technical infrastructure in rural areas is a crucial contributing factor to the quality of life of people in the countryside. Roads, waterworks, sewage system and gas infrastructure in the countryside not only make the daily lives of local people easier but also contribute to the creation of many new jobs, mainly in services, trade and small and medium-sized enterprises. According to ARiMR (Polish Agency for Restructuring and Modernisation of Agriculture), about 53,000 new non-agricultural jobs have been created in the countryside over the past 10 years (*Efekty...*, (http)).

The length of the waterworks system in rural areas increased from 2006 to 2016 by 19%, of the sewage system – by 125%, and of the gas distribution and transmission network – by 21%. The share of people using the systems in the overall population increased as follows: from 86 to 92% for the waterworks, from 20 to 40% for the sewage system, from 18 to 23% for gas and from 22 to 41% for the wastewater treatment plant (*Obszary wiejskie...*, 2017). The number of electricity customers grew by 6.3% (*Rocznik Statystyczny...*, 2017).

The significant progress in the development of the infrastructure in rural areas helps not only reduce the disproportions in the housing conditions and the comfort of life in the countryside versus cities and towns but first and foremost improve the quality of life of the rural community.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The quality of life in rural areas is worse than in cities and towns, which results primarily from the lower income of people in the countryside. The post-accession period (2006–2016) marked an improvement of the income relationship between the countryside and the urban areas, resulting from the higher dynamic of the nominal growth of disposable income in the countryside (by 102%) and in farming families (Farmers) (by 112%) versus cities and towns (an 81% increase). The higher growth dynamic for rural and farming families was mainly the outcome of the growth of income from paid employment and of the financial support granted to farms under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

The significance of paid employment in the structure of household income grew, both in the countryside and in cities and towns, while the significance of income from farming and welfare benefits dropped. Farming is losing its dominant position as the absorber of labour and source of income in a growing number of villages but it remains crucial for the preservation of natural environment in rural areas. The growth trend regarding income from paid employment in the structure of income of the rural population is permanent. It is also reinforced by migration from cities to the countryside – not only of retired people but increasingly often of representatives of liberal professions and managers – people employed in cities, often having high income.

Rural households spend a similar portion of their income as urban households to satisfy their needs (about 80% in 2016). Greater disproportions can be observed in the share of food expenses in total expenses (29% versus 23%), which is one of the major determinants of prosperity. The rural population and farming families spent a higher share of their total expenses to satisfy the basic needs (food, clothes, shoes, transport and communications), and lower to satisfy higher-level needs. In the 2006–2016 period, the disproportions in the level of expenses between the countryside and cities/towns dropped.

Household dwellings in rural areas have a lower presence of basic technical systems (mainly sewage and gas systems) and durable goods, especially modern ones (Internet, satellite TV, cable TV). Rural areas have poorer technical, transport and housing infrastructure than cities, and as a result their inhabitants have worse access to services and modern technologies. On the other hand, the countryside has a unique natural environment and landscape, which contributes to greater comfort of life in rural areas.

If we treat the level and the changes of income, expenses, living conditions and technical infrastructure in rural areas as the basic indicators of the quality of life of household members, we may conclude that the decade following Poland's accession to the European Union was a time when the quality of life improved much more for the rural and farming population than for people in urban areas. Despite that, significant disproportions can be still observed to the disadvantage of the countryside. They are the largest if we compare the rural population to inhabitants of the biggest cities.

People in the countryside have a worse subjective perception of the quality of their life than people in urban areas; they also see themselves as less capable of satisfying their needs. The assessment of the quality of life did not take into account the environment and the climate-related values of rural areas.

Roads, waterworks, the sewage system and gas infrastructure in the countryside must be improved, not only to make the daily lives of local people easier but also to contribute to the creation of new jobs, mainly in services, trade and small and medium-sized enterprises. Reducing the quality of life gap between the countryside and urban areas requires sustainable development of rural areas – in a broad sense of the term. After all, quality of life is the primary objective of sustainability.

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Summary

The purpose of the study is to assess changes in the quality of life of the rural population in the period after Polish accession to the European Union (years 2006–2016). The study was conducted on the basis of the results of the European Survey on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) and household budgets survey by CSO. The assessment of the quality of life of the rural population was based on indicators characterizing the objective living conditions (income, expenses, infrastructure, environment, housing and furnishings) and on a subjective assessment. In the assessment of the quality of life, the environmental and climate advantages of rural areas were not taken into account.

Basic indicators relate to individuals or households. Quality of life in rural areas is worse than in the cities, which is primarily due to the lower income of rural residents. Also, the level of expenditure is lower, mainly with respect to higher needs. The equipment of households with basic technical installations and durable goods, especially modern, is also worse in rural areas than in urban areas. The rural population subjectively evaluates their quality of life as worse than the urban population and they also believe that the ability to satisfy their needs is worse than in the cities.

Keywords: quality of life, rural areas, cities, housing situation, infrastructure.

Jakość życia mieszkańców wsi po akcesji Polski do Unii Europejskiej

Streszczenie

Celem opracowania jest ocena zmian jakości życia ludności zamieszkałej na wsi w okresie po akcesji Polski do Unii Europejskiej (lata 2006–2016). Badanie zostało przeprowadzone na podstawie wyników europejskiego badania dochodów i warunków życia (EU-SILC) oraz budżetów gospodarstw domowych GUS. Ocena jakości życia ludności wiejskiej dokonano w oparciu o wskaźniki charakteryzujące obiektywne warunki bytowania (dochody, wydatki, infrastruktura, warunki mieszkaniowe i wyposażenie mieszkań) oraz ocenę subiektywną. W ocenie jakości życia nie były uwzględniane środowiskowe i klimatyczne walory obszarów wiejskich. Podstawowe wskaźniki odnoszą się do osób lub gospodarstw domowych. Jakość życia na obszarach wiejskich jest gorsza niż w miastach, co wynika przede wszystkim z niższych dochodów mieszkańców wsi. Także niższy jest poziom wydatków, głównie na potrzeby wyższego rzędu. Na wsi gorsze jest wyposażenie gospodarstw domowych w podstawowe instalacje techniczne oraz dobra trwałego użytkowania, zwłaszcza nowoczesne. Mieszkańcy wsi oceniają subiektywnie jakość swojego życia gorzej niż ludność miejska; jako gorszą oceniają też możliwość realizacji potrzeb.

Słowa kluczowe: jakość życia, wieś, miasto, sytuacja mieszkaniowa, infrastruktura techniczna.

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