



STUDIA OBSZARÓW WIEJSKICH

2016, volume 43, pp. 113–123

<http://dx.doi.org/10.7163/SOW.43.8>



KOMISJA OBSZARÓW WIEJSKICH
POLSKIE TOWARZYSTWO GEOGRAFICZNE
www.ptg.pan.pl



INSTYTUT GEOGRAFII I PRZESTRZENNEGO ZAGOSPODAROWANIA
POLSKA AKADEMIA NAUK
www.igipz.pan.pl



THEMATISATION OF SPACE AS A LOCAL DEVELOPMENT FACTOR. CASE STUDY OF SIERAKOWO SŁAWIEŃSKIE AND MASŁOMĘCZ

Marcin WÓJCIK • Paulina TOBIASZ-LIS • Karolina DMOCHOWSKA-DUDEK

University of Lodz, Department of Regional and Social Geography
ul. Kopcińskiego 31, 90–142 Łódź
georeg@geo.uni.lodz.pl

Abstract: From the perspective of cultural transformations in rural areas within the last 30 years, the core process is the empowerment of local communities and thus reinforcement of social and territorial identity. The aim of the article is to identify good practices applied in the process of positive changes in selected villages as a result of mobilisation and coordination of own resources and energy, creativity and hard work of people, supported by various external incentives. Adjustment to the “place” in the process of thematisation of space results from cooperation of the local community with its nearest environment, which consists in analysing and interpreting the existing conditions with regard to the planned changes. Then, the specific assets of the environment were identified to develop further local stories, related to the original motif. Those original concepts constitute an extraordinary act of creation of the place and its adjustment to the needs of the local community and visitors. In both cases, the identification and use of specific resources was of key importance, combined with important external incentives in the form of first process creators (experts) and then possibilities of financing the entire initiative (e.g. EU funds).

Key words: local development, thematic village, rural areas.

Introduction

Local development, studied by social sciences since the 1960s, currently comprises numerous different aspects. The most important issues analysed in publications on local development include social organisation and activity, and its impact on cultural landscape transformations¹. Nowadays, when territories participate in free movement of goods, services and information, the analyses of local development foundations focus on such issues as:

- relations between local and supralocal (regional and global) functioning of the society;

¹ Literature of the subject is extensive and multidimensional. Examples include collective publications edited by G. Gorzelak (2015), I. Nurzyńska and M. Drygas (2011), M. Kłodziński et al. (2007), A. Rosner (2012), M. Wójcik (2014), M. Wójcik and K. Ł. Czapiewski (2015), as well as K. Ł. Czapiewski (2010), E. Psyk-Piotrowska et al. (2013).

- impact of the territory (various resources) on establishment of institutions (closeness and putting down roots);
- impact of social capital (e.g. knowledge and trust) on the success of undertaken activities.

The focus on social activities, grass-roots initiatives of residents and diversity of local resources require new interpretations and presentation of analysed issues in research on local systems (villages, settlement systems). It should be first assumed that every village is unique and specific, has its own original development path with a great role played by local knowledge available only to the members of a given community. In social relations, a hugely important role is played by leaders who have knowledge and skills to lead the action group and stimulate its work at various stages of implemented initiatives. Also important is social partnership understood as a set of various relations, more or less formal, between stakeholders of local development processes².

From the perspective of cultural transformations in rural areas within the last 30 years, the core process is the empowerment of local communities and thus reinforcement of social and territorial identity. The landscape dimension of changes consists in, *inter alia*, the strive to improve the aesthetics of space, in particular public space, and various forms of settlement revitalisation. Some of them originate from ideas aimed at highlighting the main subject, topic, around which the ideas are implemented. Thematisation of villages has a relatively long history of both successes and failures in local development³.

The effects of socio-economic transformation and European experience of Polish villages are particularly well-visible in the areas for many years considered to be problematic, mainly in terms of their socio-cultural aspects. Such two villages are presented as case studies in this publication. The aim of the article is to identify good practices applied in the process of positive changes in selected villages as a result of mobilisation and coordination of own resources and energy, creativity and hard work of people, supported by various external incentives.

Case studies

The essence of the problem presented in the article is to identify social activities boosting the activity of residents, institutionalisation of activities and their various cultural, economic and landscape effects. The villages were selected especially for that purpose. The case studies present active thematic villages, namely, Sierakowo Sławieńskie (Zachodniopomorskie Voivodeship) and Maśmęcz (Lubelskie Voivodeship), whose residents did a great job in a difficult social environment with a complicated history. The villages share a common history of post-war settlement of people from various parts of the country and their adjustment to the new living environment. The history of Poland still influences its regional diversification, including the formation of regional cultures based on socio-cultural and territorial identity of the population. In numerous Polish regions, both in the west and in some border areas in the east, where the population was exchanged as a result of decisions made by the winning powers after the World War II, for several decades the

² Cf. e.g. Ch. Ray (2006).

³ Cf. e.g. P. Rzeńca (2015).

conditions were not conducive to creation of community values. The process of overcoming the cultural non-adjustment of the population to the space lasted for years, with its negative aspects involving destruction of cultural heritage due to lack of awareness of its value, or simply the lack of knowledge and appropriate skills. The mixing of people coming from different regions, in particular the former eastern borderland and central Poland, and organisation of their work in numerous State Agricultural Holdings was a well-thought-out strategy aimed at increasing the effectiveness of instruments for controlling and manipulating the local communities. Difficult social transformation of areas where state farms were previously located, the economic crisis and social helplessness with respect to new processes made it increasingly complicated to restore social identity based on regional assets and values of individual places. The search for an appropriate mechanism to overcome not only the economic crisis, but also the identity crisis was and still is a long process, requiring special mobilisation and coordination of activities of local communities.



Photo 1. Central part of Sierakowo Sławieńskie (photo: M. Wójcik)

Sierakowo Sławieńskie is located in the Sianów gmina, approx. 30 km from the Baltic Sea coast. In the past, the Cistercian order left its mark on the village. Nowadays it is an average Polish village in terms of population, with approx. 200 permanent residents, and with such basic facilities as a shop, a library, a day room, Voluntary Fire Brigade, a church and a bus stop. The village is built along several roads, but it is not very densely built up and has a relatively clear centre (remains of the previous oval-shaped layout) at the junction of the roads, with a pond and architectural and functional dominant features, such as a historic church, the building of the Voluntary Fire Brigade with related public utility buildings, shops and a smithy. The church, as well as former farm buildings, once also

a destroyed palace, are located on one of the small hills in the village. Material cultural heritage demonstrates a former relatively high functional rank of the village in the local settlement network. Residential and farm complexes, a church, a school, a smithy, as well as a nearby distillery and a mill constituted an interesting functional and spatial complex along with homesteads, and the village was inhabited by an integrated and active local community. The former rank of the village is also demonstrated by a relatively large cemetery in the forest east of the village. Post-war recession of functions and loss of some activities creating the supralocal rank of Sierakowo, as well as a decrease in the population by almost a half, resulted in peripherisation of the village, evidenced by changes in its administrative assignment to gminas (Sławno, Sianów). Sierakowo Sławieńskie underwent numerous processes characteristic for land incorporated by Poland in 1945, i.e. ethnic and cultural mixing, nationalisation of land and underinvestment in services to meet the socio-economic needs of the population.



Photo 2. Example of a house of incoming settlers in Masłomęcz (photo: P. Tobiasz-Lis)

Masłomęcz is a small village in the Lublin region, in the Hrubieszów Valley, near Hrubieszów, 8 km from the border from Ukraine. The village has approx. 400 permanent residents, but they are spatially dispersed, since the village consists of scattered settlements. The past glory of the village is evidenced only by partially preserved layout of roads and fields. No traces – neither in space nor in the memory of inhabitants who arrived in these areas after the World War II – are left after the former farm comprising Masłomęcz and nearby Czerniczynek, former Uniate church, elementary school and the windmill, which in the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century decided about the rank of

the village. A complex set of factors, mainly political, historical and demographic contributed to the contemporary structure of the Hrubieszów region, and thus Masłomęcz. The formerly multicultural community comprising Ruthenians, Poles and Jews was affected by numerous transformations during the war and in the post-war period, which resulted in the change of its social structure. The most important factors in this regard included the resettlements of Ukrainians from Poland to the Ukrainian Soviet Republic in the years 1945–46 the “Vistula” operation in 1947⁴, as well as settlement by the Poles repatriated from the Soviet Union in the years 1944–1948 and in the 1950s. The small houses of post-war settlers, built of red brick according to the same design, with an orchard and surrounded by four-hectare field without fencing, but with buffer strips, are the most characteristic features of cultural landscape of the village. Until the end of 1990s, agriculture, in particular sugar beet farming on fertile local soils (black earth) was the predominant function. Economic transformations of the village and decreasing importance of agriculture resulted in an increased interest in opportunities arising from the cultural heritage.

Genesis and institutionalisation of thematic villages

Changes in local communities of the analysed villages were initiated by people from outside the local environment, specialists in specific research fields, who were determined to transform local social and material resources into assets attracting people from outside the village.

Around a dozen years ago, sociologist Waław Idziak, fascinated with possibilities to animate local communities, initiated the establishment of a thematic village in Sierakowo Sławieńskie, along with its leitmotifs. Thematisation of space, as an act of creation building on local socio-cultural and natural potential, is currently a method, widely commented and described in literature and the media, to make the “place” (in this case a village) known on the global scale. Narrowly understood, it is focused on selecting a leitmotif for places, events or persons, which becomes the basis for creating tourist products and serves mainly the marketing purposes. Broadly understood, it is a model for development of rural community providing the basis for acquiring, creating and developing the local identity.

First of all, the focus should be on physical features, since they became one of key reasons for introducing the fairy tale narration into the local scenery. The location of the village among forests, with numerous new trees (poor soil) in varied topographic conditions, and the presence of numerous interesting objects of cultural heritage, contributed greatly to building a space for Tolkien’s stories, adjusted to local conditions. Due to its peripheral location, also on a local (gmina) scale, in an area characterised by low population density and thus also low density of rural settlement network, Sierakowo has certain features of a spatial structure that is isolated in natural (hills and forests are the barrier), settlement (large distance from other compact villages) and mental terms due to the lack of view of other settlements. Such conditions created by the space (place) offered relatively large room for transferring the adventures of *The Lord of the Rings* characters into

⁴ Operation Vistula (Polish: Akcja „Wisła”) was a codename for the 1947 forced resettlement of Ukrainian minority including Boykos and Lemkos from the south-eastern provinces of post-war Poland, to the Recovered Territories in the west of the country.

the scenery of Pomerania. Perhaps the presentation of the concept to local community by a social activities animator, encounter with Tolkien's works, unfolding the magic and describing mythical lands, and timeless motif of struggle between good and evil, would have remained at the stage of design, if not for a great commercial success of the film adaptations of Tolkien's books.

The idea to create the Hobbit Village was laid down in the Sianów Gmina Development Strategy (2000) and was one of many such projects in Poland. The concept was largely an adaptation of ideas already implemented in European Union countries. The relation between searching for new functions of the village, pre-accession support and funds available after Poland's accession to the EU, was an important element in launching the thematisation of rural areas. Such villages were first established using own funds (gmina, village, own work, support from sponsors). This type of support for local development, in particular peripheral areas, fulfils a number of socio-cultural and economic functions, as well as those related to reorganisation of rural space. The development of the initiative to build a thematic village in Sierakowo Sławieńskie can in many aspects be considered a model example of a social action for the creation of joint institutions and involvement of many actors with various roles in the local community that regains its subjectivity. In the anatomy of this action, the leading role was played by leaders: guides, idea promoters, including the head of the primary school supported by the parish, farmers' wives' association, and village authorities. The essence of the initial stage of an idea for a theme on which the village "narrative" would be focused consisted in initiatives from the teachers of the primary school. It was well assumed that children and their parents, with the support of school authority and institutions more or less formally connected with the school (gmina authorities, parish) could become the main driver of this initiative in the local community. Expedient establishment of the Hobbiton Association (2003) closed the initial stage and enabled such organisation of the group, with all its actors and their assigned functions and allowed to apply for more serious funds for activity and changes in the village. The accession of Poland to the EU in 2004 opened new possibilities to obtain European funds for the implementation of subsequent ideas and introduction of Tolkien motifs into village space and many other based on the characteristics of the natural and cultural environment⁵.

In the case of Masłomęcz the turn in the life of the village took place in 1977 when archaeologist A. Kokowski and his team started excavations in Hrubieszów Valley. After a careful analysis of what Goths left behind in various parts of Europe, he was sure they could stop there in their migrations. During excavations between 1977 and 2002, a complex of Goth settlements and cemeteries from the 2nd-4th c. was discovered. Journeying from the north of our continent, Goths settled in Hrubieszów Valley offering good natural conditions and developed their military and trade power there. It is estimated that at that time the population of Masłomęcz was 2,000, which is why the village was considered the capital of the Goth community. Initially distrustful of "strangers", the residents of Masłomęcz slowly got used to the presence of archaeologists every summer. With time, every season of excavations ended in a common feast of archaeologists and the local community. This tradition continues, and the Archaeological Feast is now the most important regular event organised in Masłomęcz by the Goths' Village Association.

⁵ Cf. the initiatives and activity of the Hobbiton Association in Sierakowo Sławieńskie at: <http://www.sierakowo.wioskitematyczne.org.pl>.

The Association was officially established in 2010, although the local community started to get involved in the reconstruction and popularisation of cultural and historical heritage of the region already in 2002, in reply to winding up of 25-year-long excavations. In effect, a partnership of the residents, NGOs and authorities was set up in the form of a Local Action Group Hrubieszów Association "Better Tomorrow" that developed a plan of using the historical and cultural heritage of Goths for tourism purposes. In 2009 Masłomęcz was visited by representatives of the Swiss-Polish Cooperation Programme. In consequence, authorities of Hrubieszów gmina received considerable financial support for the programme "From a vision to modern Gothania region management" whose purpose is to create a tourist brand of the entire region and stimulate the residents in economic terms⁶. Actions such as creation of a special curriculum devoted to the most remote history of the region in schools and organisation of competitions in knowledge about Goths were also important.

Effects of thematic villages on local development

Institutionalisation of undertakings that consist in thematisation of both villages resulted in exceptional effects, both social and economic, together with creation of new landscape forms. Both the Hobbit Village in Sierakowo Sławieńskie and the Goths' Village in Masłomęcz consolidated the local communities of these villages anew.

In Sierakowo Sławieńskie it was important to define a central place as a point of reference for the local community and for guests who follow the Hobbit tale. The historically shaped village centre was unable to create such conditions for the undertakings due to heritage of functional and spatial management, the more so as with time the idea crystallised to build a Hobbit village as a complex of facilities that reflect the settlement from the land of *Shire* and are suited to open air events organised by the village residents. The square in front of the primary school was suitable for relatively large architectural projects and was a perfect place in practical terms (car parks, room for actions auxiliary to events, etc.). In a symbolic sense, the Sierakowo local community created a specific "place", i.e. the Hobbit Village and annual events, including the most important event that attracts masses of people from Poland and abroad: the Hobbit Fair. The created place also has its architectural dominant in the form of the "Elf Tower" that has become the graphic symbol of the actions and at the same time a place from which all Sierakowo can be seen and *vice versa*: in everyday situations the village residents feel the tower's presence in a less or more conscious way.

As in the case of many similar rural communities in Poland, liquidation of the primary school due to a declining number of children was a sad event in Sierakowo Sławieńskie. Moreover, as at the initial stage of implementing the thematic village of Hobbits', the school constituted one of the most important places to promote the idea, and children together with teachers were active mediators of creative initiatives in the space of Tolkien's tale. It became natural for Sierakowo residents to fight for maintenance of this institution, especially as the former school building is topographically coupled with the most important created place of the leitmotif, i.e. the Hobbit village. As an active participant of

⁶ Cf. the initiatives and activity of the Goths' Village Masłomęcz Association at: <http://www.wioska-gotow.pl/>.

actions for the creation of a thematic village, the gmina authorities decided to lend the former school building to the Hobbiton Association (2011) free of charge. Thus, a place important to so many generations remained in symbolic possession of the community as a type of continuation in upkeeping local identity. The school building with auxiliary facilities is now again becoming the place of social identification that attracts people with ideas and faith in further social lasting of the village. On the one hand, it has become a monument connecting with the past, as it restores memory of everything that happened there in the lives of several generations, and on the other hand hope was unfolded that it would continue to serve the village residents in their actions for the benefit of the launched mechanism of creating new identifications based on the idea of a “Hobbit village”. The creation of a thematic village played a similarly positive role in saving a historic blacksmith’s shop from destruction. Obtaining funds for the “Grandfather Filowiat Blacksmith’s Shop” project on the one hand included this place in the Hobbit journey narrative, perfectly emphasising the motif of fire and related magical powers, and on the other hand saved the legacy of the people who had left that land and memory of post-war events and familiarisation of the place by new settlers from forgetfulness and destruction.

The value added of all undertakings in this respect has been a great discovery of the significance of space. The subject of the Hobbit community aroused interest in the intertwining of time and space. A modest but highly valuable church building triggered passion for learning about the extraordinary Cistercian Order and its culture-forming role in the organisation of Pomeranian land in the Middle Ages, which was the purpose of a wider project “Social economy on a Cistercian trail”. This action highlighted social interest in the village’s past, valuable buildings in the village, uniqueness of cultural heritage and the need to preserve it.



Photo 3. Hobbit Village buildings (photo: M. Wójcik)



Photo 4. Reconstructions of traditional buildings in the Goths' Village (photo: P. Tobiasz-Lis).

At the same time Masłomęcz underwent a similar transformation. In 2006 a wooden thatched cottage was built there, a faithful reconstruction on a scale of 1:2 of a Goth cottage from the 3rd or 4th century that was the beginning of an open air museum: the Goths' Village. Extensive cooperation with research establishments was started to precisely recreate the image of the region's past. In 2008 a Goth Group was created with support of young archaeologists B. Bartecki and A. Hyrchała, students of Professor Kokowski, who started work at the Hrubieszów museum. At present the group is composed of 30 people in various age who re-enact drafts, everyday life, rituals and martial arts of the tribe after a series of trainings with professionals: artisans, re-enactors and under supervision of museum personnel. The local social initiative was noticed by the media and authorities of neighbouring regions. It has become a showpiece of the Hrubieszów region.

The Goths' Village is now the fastest developing place on the tourist map of Hrubieszów powiat. Its organiser is the Hrubieszów gmina, substantive supervision is provided by the Rev. Stanisław Staszic Museum in Hrubieszów, and the scientific patronage is exercised by the Institute of Archaeology of the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin. Workshops and old craft demonstrations are prepared by the Goths' Village Masłomęcz Association. The open air museum features several buildings (a Goth cottage, a semi-dug-out, a weaver's cottage, a cottage of a warrior and merchant, and a potter's homestead) reconstructed using various construction techniques from the Roman period. They serve as the background not only for regular open air events, but also for 'live' history lessons with demonstrations and workshops dedicated to old crafts, fighting shows, and presentation of historical cuisine.

The Goths' Village is the basic element generating organised tourist traffic to Masłomęcz and an important factor of creating the village's multi-functional development. The open air museum around which a new centre of the scattered settlement keeps developing is filled with new facilities and events. It is an extraordinary example of grassroots actions and social stimulation of village residents who identify with the Goth tribe that lived there 1,700 years ago.

The Goths' Village development is accompanied by establishment of agri-tourism farms where, in addition to accommodation and a variety of services (bike and ATV rental, horse riding), one can buy and taste home-made preserves made from local products. Vegetables, mushrooms, fruit, juices, honeys and fruit liqueurs delight with their colour and taste. The Masłomęcz shop located next to the Goths' Village sells several kinds of Gothic beer with labels featuring a drawing of a Gothic cottage and the symbol of Gothania.

Summary

The uniqueness of Sierakowo Sławieńskie and Masłomęcz residents' initiatives consists in achieving exceptional effects as a result of strengthening relationships between people and space. Adjustment to the "place" in the process of thematisation of space results from cooperation of the local community with its nearest environment, which consists in analysing and interpreting the existing conditions with regard to the planned changes. Then, the specific assets of the environment were identified to develop further local stories, related to the original motif. Those original concepts constitute an extraordinary act of creation of the place and its adjustment to the needs of the local community and visitors. In both cases, the identification and use of specific resources was of key importance, combined with important external incentives in the form of first process creators (experts) and then possibilities of financing the entire initiative (e.g. EU funds).

Solution to problems with achieving the assumed objectives is an act of building awareness in the local community and cultural and territorial identity within it. Organisation of a group of people whose major trait is the ability to cooperate is a true test for the local community. Rural social relations that become the driver for various actions are largely based on the neighbour and family circles. Leaders are the first factor to form a group and to impart adequate dynamics of implementing new ideas. Then institutions are important to stimulate and integrate visions within social activity. Formalisation of the institutions, imparting them with a legal and organisational dimension, leads in consequence to development of an actual development strategy, gradual creation of physical forms for carrying out ideas (infrastructure) and reproduction of activity, especially in terms of cyclical events (e.g. a calendar of annual events).

References

- Biczkowski M.**, 2013, *Fundusze unijne jako czynnik rozwoju regionalnego w odniesieniu do koncepcji rozwoju neoendogenicznego*, *Studia Obszarów Wiejskich*, 34, pp. 71–85.
- Czapiewski K.Ł.**, 2010, *Koncepcja wiejskich obszarów sukcesu społeczno-gospodarczego i ich rozpoznanie w województwie mazowieckim*, *Studia Obszarów Wiejskich*, 22.
- Gorzelał G.** (ed.), 2015, *Polska gmina 2015*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Warszawa.
- Kłodziński M., Błąd M., Wilczyński R.** (ed.), 2007, *Odnowa wsi w integrującej się Europie*, Instytut Rozwoju Wsi i Rolnictwa, Warszawa.
- Nurzyńska I., Drygas M.** (ed.), 2011, *Rozwój obszarów wiejskich w Polsce*, Instytut Rozwoju Wsi i Rolnictwa, Warszawa.
- Psyk-Piotrowska E., Zajda K., Kretek-Kamińska A., Walczak-Duraj D.**, 2013, *Struktura i uwarunkowania kapitału społecznego lokalnych grup działania*, Wydawnictwo UŁ, Łódź.
- Ray Ch.**, 2006, *Neo-endogenous rural development in the UE*, [in:] *Handbook of Rural Studies*, pp. 278–292.
- Rosner A.** (ed.), 2012, *Społeczne i kulturowe zagadnienia przemian na wsi polskiej*, Instytut Rozwoju Wsi i Rolnictwa, Warszawa.
- Rzeńca P.**, 2015, *Tematyzacja przestrzeni jako metoda zarządzania rozwojem lokalnym*, [in:] A. Nowakowska (ed.), *Nowoczesne metody i narzędzia zarządzania rozwojem lokalnym i regionalnym*, pp. 113–141.
- Wójcik M.** (ed.), 2014, *Regionalny wymiar przemian polskiej wsi – aspekty społeczne i środowiskowe*, *Studia Obszarów Wiejskich*, 35.
- Wójcik M., Czapiewski K.Ł.** (ed.), 2015, *Edukacja i kapitał ludzki w rozwoju lokalnym i regionalnym*, *Studia Obszarów Wiejskich*, 40.

