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## **Hobbiton and other ideas: opportunities and barriers on the way of Polish marginal rural areas to the knowledge based economy**

### **Abstract**

In Polish villages, especially in those, where there have been running State Owned Farms till early 1990s, local communities are lost in present days. They are switching, with big difficulties, from agricultural-dominated economics to existing in the knowledge based economy (KBE) and from central management in local development to endogenous growth. In the lack of financial capital and other resources, and in a very dynamic reality, adaptation to new conditions needs innovations and experiments connected with use of non-material development factors.

This article presents initial results of a social experiment, whose indirect objective is to investigate the possibility in the present socio-economic conditions of the transition of Polish villages located in marginal rural areas to the knowledge based economy, as well as what factors facilitate the transition of rural areas to this type of economy and what restrains this process.

The results of the experiment obtained to this day confirm the fact that in spite of numerous barriers and difficulties Polish marginal rural areas may take advantage of the opportunities created by the knowledge based economy.

### **Introduction**

At present, significant changes are taking place in economy and social life. They are defined as a transition from an economy whose main driving force was industry, which earlier dethroned agriculture, to an economy dominated by services and information [Bell 1974, Drucker 1999, Naissbitt 1997, Toffler, Toffler 1996]. In the recent years, such an economy has been called a knowledge based economy [Drucker 1999, Kukliński 2001].

Knowledge has all the time constituted an important factor of an economic development, yet its importance has considerably risen even more over the recent decades. It has become a basic production factor, financial capital and labor being left behind in this role. In such an economy, we deal with such phenomena and trends as following:

- An extension of the number of options and possibilities of choice: this, however, applies to those who are prepared to the participation in a new economy; those who have learned to recognize new opportunities and how to take advantage of these. Those who cannot do it, centered upon the past, think that “everything has been done”.
- Innovations: a new economy feeds itself upon novelties, it expects those things which are distinguishable and unique; what comes first is what counts, very much like in sports and arts.
- Experiments: new solutions require tests and experiments; with this, comes the risk of errors: the faster the changes and the bolder the tasks, the greater this risk is.
- A revolution in learning: it is becoming more and more difficult to learn in advance and with the use of traditional methods [Dryden, Vos 1999]; it is more and more frequently that the success of organizations and regions depends on learning [Senge 2000].

- Dematerialization: what is non-material and hard to measure is gaining significance: ideas, symbols, values, images, emotions; the role of the so-called culture industries is growing [Lehmann 2002].
- Glocalization: joining activities on the local and global scale.
- New capitals: human and social capitals are gaining significance.

A brand new world with numerous possibilities is being open; unfortunately only for those who can perceive and use that. Those who are wearing old glasses and cannot see through them new opportunities and avail themselves of these opportunities are subject to being marginal and excluded from the circulation of economy and social life.

### **Polish rural areas in the face of the knowledge based economy**

The Polish rural areas, taking it in very general terms, is poorly prepared for the participation in the knowledge based economy (KBE). This is the result of a mediocre level of the knowledge infrastructure and a low level of the education of those living in the country<sup>1</sup> in combination with such factors as the following:

- small flexibility as regards changing one's qualifications and the creation of jobs outside agriculture,
- a dispersed settlement network, which contributes to higher development costs of the technological infrastructure,
- an atomization of rural communities,
- a low awareness of the significance of the KBE as well as little activity on the part of most of local self-governments concerning its promotion,
- focusing in the part of most of local self-governments on temporary activities to facilitate an electoral success in next terms of office,
- no clear and system support of transformations in the country on the part of the government administration.

What can be the prospects of the development of rural areas in such circumstances? Generally speaking, two ways are possible. One can follow the present trends in economy, making as a consequence a transition to the KBE, or the stadium that will follow it. One can also, while adhering to the traditional beliefs concerning economy, with dreams of a strong agriculture and investors building factories, go back to the simplest manners of farming and living. The inhabitants of numerous villages, especially those where there used to be State Owned Farms, have unfortunately gone to the other side and are indeed beginning to go back to picking and hunting.

What is to be done when the ways to support the development of the countryside pursued so far are of little help? One can count on the aid from the European Union, however without the preparation of good projects, without ideas, innovations, without experimenting and learning, in one word: without entering the way leading to the KBE, this will too be of little help as badly invested money can make the present situation even worse.

If we agree that the solution lies in pursuing the knowledge based economy then we have two options:

- making up for the backlog: investing in education, organization of trainings, raising the level of education and qualifications of those living in the rural areas with the help of traditional school methods, learning in advance,

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<sup>1</sup> Only as little as 2 per cent of those living in the countryside have a degree, and 54.6 per cent have primary education and incomplete primary education.

- learning in action: creation of situations, challenges, opportunities, ideas provoking one to achieve skills and knowledge with regard to particular needs, gaining knowledge needed here and now; making use of common knowledge; agreeing to incomplete knowledge; making education less formal, perceiving school in its new role as a center of local development, admitting various ways to acquire knowledge, discovering children and youth in the role of teachers; a transformation of a village into a kind of a learning organization.

Many things point to the fact that leading the rural areas to the knowledge based economy through making up for backlogs, though necessary, may not fulfill the hopes. There are such barriers as a low level of aspirations on the part of those living in the country, fear for traditional teaching methods due to earlier failures in the field of education, lack of funds and properly trained staff, as well as poor furnishing with equipment and teaching aids of most of village schools. Nevertheless, the most serious barrier is the need to learn in advance, without the guarantee of finding a job.

It is evident from the above that the opportunities of leading the rural areas to the KBE should be sought rather in the second solution, which is learning in action. The experiment as described below serves to verify this option.

### **Description of the experiment**

Commencing with spring 1999, a social quasi-experiment has been conducted, whose aim is to verify the feasibility of the implementation of the second option (i.e., learning in action), and thus examining the following:

- is it possible, in the present socio-economic conditions, to lead Polish marginal rural areas to the knowledge based economy?
- what facilitates the transition of the rural areas to this type of economy and what impedes this process?

Symbolic interactionism was accepted as a theoretical perspective of the research. The research method applied assumes the treatment of an individual as an aware subject of activities. As a result of this, relations occurring in the research process should possess the nature of a subject, too. This concerns both the relationship between the researcher and the one on whom the research is being carried out, as well as between the researcher's attitude to himself/herself and the problem being examined. This approach is contrary to the positivistic sociological tradition, where the researcher is situated above the reality examined, as an objective observer who is trying not to interfere in the subject under examination [Wyka 1993]. The action research was regarded as a methodology which fulfills the premises of interactionism. The basic assumptions of such research include the following [Stringer 1996]:

- a pragmatic approach to the research process
- the treatment of an individual, traditionally regarded as the subject of research, as its subject actively participating in the research process
- the research results must be connected in a practical manner with the life or work of the research participants

An experiment based upon the methodology of action research can be represented as a spiral composed of repeatable elements:

- Observation means collecting proper information to build a full picture of reality.
- Reflection is a stage to advance hypotheses concerning the reality found as well as an attempt to interpret this reality and explain the problems.

- Action: on this stage, the action is planned and implemented. This phase completes with the appraisal of the effects of the action undertaken (an evaluation) and with planning further steps.

Taking these phases in the form of a spiral means their repeatability. This also makes it possible to continuously adapt the research process and the direction of the actions undertaken to the changing social reality. The aim of this procedure is to gain a possibility to observe the change, which in this methodology, in accordance with the premises of symbolical interactionism, is comprehended in a non-linear manner, as a process devoid of a clear beginning and an end, continuously occurring and evaluating.

The place of the experiment is communes<sup>2</sup> of Zachodniopomorskie and Pomorskie provinces located in the areas defined as marginal rural areas [Duczowska – Małysz 1999]. They are characterized by a high level of unemployment: up to 37 per cent, and one of the lowest (in the scale of the province) incomes of the commune per capita. The warp of the experiment are activities connected with the specialization of village schools and villages, which leads to the creation of thematic villages.

A thematic village is a village which has its own and unique idea for development. Owing to the implementation of this idea it becomes distinctive. A village specializing in a particular field in comparison with other villages scores greater success in many fields. Finding a development subject lets them concentrate on the most essential issues. A good development subject is for a village like a unique sale proposal for a company.

The following assumptions accompany the experiment:

- Work with the use of an appreciative inquiry method. The appreciative inquiry method creates a development path while making use of what is good rather than of what is bad and problematic [Elliot 1999].
- Aiming at a specialization of a village schools and a village. A village schools and a village cannot present itself to the world from a general perspective. It has to accept a development direction in order to achieve something. A selection of a development direction requires the needs concerning learning not in general but with respect to a given specialization. A new specialization model is different from the one that used to accompany the eras of agriculture and industry. It resembles a network of connections around a common development subject, together with a complex and multidirectional use of potentials present in these connections.
- An aspiration for being distinctive. The knowledge based economy feeds itself on novelties and distinctiveness; it can be compared to a conversation. One who has a good and interesting topic has an opportunity to come into existence in this conversation.
- Work with a method of small steps. Due to a poor preparation of the villages to changes it cannot be introduced with these in too a drastic manner, it should be secured. The method of small steps serves this purpose. Starting with small things we learn how to cope with greater difficulties and we gradually gain faith in a success. With this method, it is important that each next step be connected with the possibility to earn money, even on a small scale.
- Making use of internal and external resources. The basis of the development of a village may be formed with what we find in it, but also external resources, including especially ideas, information, people and organizations.

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<sup>2</sup> These are the following communes: Malechowo, Sianów, Postomino (Zachodniopomorskie province) and Rzecznica commune (Pomorskie province).

The author of the present article is the moderator of this experiment. The following participate, as voluntaries, in the realization of the experiment: local leaders – especially teachers, students of The Technical University of Koszalin and other universities, young people from secondary schools in Koszalin, as well as children and youth from the communes included in the experiment.

The experiment is financed mainly through the preparation of applications for grants to various aid programs. A financial support of a particular project on the part of the local self-governments is ca. 10 per cent of their realization costs.

In the experiment as conducted so far, the following has been achieved:

- The commencement of the specialization of a kindergarten, four primary schools and one high school: juggling, ecological education, regional education, meteorology and wind.
- Creation of germs of six thematic villages: a hobbits' village, a fairy-tale village, a Neolithic hamlet, early medieval hamlet, a bridge village, a wind village.
- Foundation of four associations.
- Preparation and implementation of 16 projects.<sup>3</sup>
- Organization of two seminars and a national scientific conference, with 250 total participants.
- A creation of an opportunity of a periodical earning for ca. 90 people.

The course of the experiment will be presented here as an example of two projects. The first one concerns the specialisation of a village and the creation of a thematic village on the basis of some plots of J.R.R. Tolkien's prose; the second one is connected with the specialisation of a rural grammar school in the area of juggling.

### **Hobbiton**

Sierakowo is a village with 300 inhabitants, is located peripherally far from larger towns and better roads, in the middle of woods, however without distinctive tourist attractions. The economy of the village is based on agriculture and forestry. Till the year 1990, a State Owned Farm operated here, which employed 30 inhabitants of the village. There is still a school in the village, but due to a decreasing number of pupils it is endangered with liquidation. Lack of traditions, poor preparation on the part of the inhabitants, apathy, numerous cases of social helplessness and a shortage of money, all constitute a barrier for the development of alternative sources of income, for example ones connected with rural tourism.

In Sierakowo there occurred an exchange of its inhabitants after the year 1945. Germans left the place, which was then settled down by people of Polish descent (from central Poland and former Polish lands being now part of the Ukraine) and of Ukrainian origin (displaced by force from south-east Poland as part of fight against Ukrainian nationalist). For these reasons, the social and cultural capital of Sierakowo is rather poor: it was difficult to undertake joint activities. One could not, during the whole post-war period, until 1989, make a reference to the German cultural heritage of these lands, and due to a diversified origin of the settlers and the then policy of the state, the heritage of the origin regions was dissolved in general culture. In such circumstances, during the workshop devoted to planning the development strategy for Sianów commune, where Sierakowo is located<sup>4</sup>, an idea was put forward that owing to the fact that the landscape of Sierakowo resembles the land of Shire from the novel by J.R.R. Tolkien, one can attempt a creation of Hobbiton: a thematic village around the plots connected with Hobbits. This idea was tentatively accepted by the village representatives

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<sup>3</sup> This concerns solely the so-called soft projects, we do not include infrastructure projects here.

<sup>4</sup> The workshop was held from February to May 2001.

participating in the workshop and then presented and accepted on the general assembly of the village inhabitants. On this meeting, its participants also prepared an initial plan to create a thematic village and within its area, for feature games and active education, and a Centre of Earth Architecture.

Work on putting the idea into practice began in spring 2001 and is still continuing. It is held in consecutive cycles, which combine observation, reflection and action. So far, three large cycles have been realised, which fit in the scale of individual years. The climax of each of them was a big event in open air - "Hobbit's Fair":

Cycle 1: preparation of the foundation of the project<sup>5</sup>, preparation of the site for the Hobbits' village, earth work and cleaning-up work, laying out and testing the route of the feature game.

Cycle 2: construction of the first cottages in Hobbits' village and the tower of Elfs, preparation of the inhabitants for the work on the route.

Cycle 3: an expansion of Hobbits' village, starting the route of feature games and running the game "There and Back", owing to which ca. 30 inhabitants of the village have an opportunity for additional earnings in the period from May to September.

Each cycle was combined with an opportunity to earn money. In next cycles, the forms of earning money were increased and more diversified. The first wages were connected with the organisation of galas. These were accompanied by a high risk and a fear against the unknown as the inhabitants of the village were not prepared for a new form of work, work in services or being actors in the world created by them.

The Hobbits' village is created by Sierakowo inhabitants and with a large contribution from people from outside: students, those fascinated with Tolkien, scouts and inhabitants of nearby villages. The supporting point for these activities is the Primary School in Sierakowo and a Voluntary Fire Brigade squat from Sierakowo.

### **Juggling**

An example of other project which fairly well illustrates a transition of a rural areas to the knowledge based economy can be illustrated with a project entitled "Those Creative Have a Chance", which was realized from October 2002 to February 2003 in The High School and Primary School in Malechowo. This project consisted in the dissemination, among the students of The High School and then the students of the primary schools in Malechowo Commune, of techniques aiding creative learning and problem solving, and especially the skill of juggling. This skill, through an integration of cerebral hemispheres, improves the skill of learning and increases the creativity potential.

Within the confines of the project, the first juggling manual in Poland has been prepared and a production of own balls for juggling has been started. As a result of the project's activities, first a group of 20 youth jugglery trainers was prepared, who then taught juggling to ca. 450 students from the area of the commune.

The students of The High School, once they mastered juggling and the skill of teaching juggling to others, created teams which promote juggling in other schools and also during activities on summer camps and galas owing to which they learn entrepreneurship and how to earn money.

Juggling also forms an opportunity to establish the following contacts: with juggling associations active in many EU countries and in the USA, with other schools which promote

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<sup>5</sup> On this stage, work which children was of primary importance; through them, adults joined the project.

juggling and circus didactics, with scientific centers dealing with research into the possibilities of the brain development and new methods to aid the learning process and creative thinking. These contacts may yield various forms of cooperation and will help to transfer the activities from the local to global scale. The second Festival of Juggling and Knowledge is scheduled for June 2004; together with it, a scientific conference is to be held and devoted to “exercising” the brain. Juggling shows in a forcible way that starting practically from scratch: instead of balls, one can use stones, apples, scarves, sticks, cones ... one opens an area of immeasurable possibilities.

## **Conclusions**

The experiment has provided answers to the following questions:

- is it possible, in the present socio-economic conditions, to lead Polish marginal rural areas to the knowledge based economy?
- what facilitates the transition of the rural areas to this type of economy and what impedes this process?

From the experiment conducted so far it is evident that the transition of Polish marginal rural areas to the knowledge based economy is possible, although it is difficult and risky. The process is facilitated by such factors and phenomena as the following:

- little choice: difficulties in finding work and sources of income within traditional occupations and jobs,
- participation of rural schools in the realization of the experiment,
- support of grant programs and rewards for a successful realization of projects,
- help from voluntaries: local leaders, students, pupils,
- first financial successes connected with the realization of individual project, an opportunity to earn money,
- feeling of pride resulting from the fact that “they write about us in papers, show us on TV and we are in the Internet”,
- doing something concrete and tangible: the structures in the hobbits’ village and in the replicas of settlements from Neolithic and early Middle ages paper molding plant, a park of chapels, stalls, cycling paths, etc.,
- an increase of the social capital: new organizations, joint actions, an identification with a group.

The following pose obstacles to the transition of villages to the knowledge based economy:

- lack of support from the government administration in combination with mistakes in the regional development policy,
- difficulties with accepting new social roles,
- alcoholism and an inborn helplessness in the case of part of the inhabitants of rural areas,
- mental barriers: nostalgia connected with the past, quick discouragement with failures, a poor preparation for discovering and making use of new possibilities,
- a short-term policy on the level of the local self-government (to next elections), which distracts one’s attention from system and risky activities; a mistake may cost a lot,
- stopping too soon on the basic stages of activities, difficulties in the exploitation of ideas on higher and more refined levels of money earning, focusing on material and tangible effects of activities,
- little knowledge on the management of projects; many people are of the opinion that money from a grant should be used for “more important aims”, e.g. a construction of a pavement or a sewerage system,

- a belief that a development occurs owing to external factors, little faith in one's own strength.

Apart from that, the experiment has proved the following:

- An island development is possible. One can do something for the development of one's school and village even though other schools and villages do not do it,
- The activities connected with the specialisation of schools and villages release activity which was previously suppressed by a centralistic state system and the party's policy, and later by poverty and lack of prospects. At the same time, one does not have to wait, as it was formerly, for instructions and money from the superior authorities, one does not even have to ask them for approval but just has to act.
- Local rural development is connected in a distinctive way with the revitalisation of the rural civic society: the number of roles played and social positions possessed increases, the level of organisation is greater, the feeling of pride grows, there is a greater identification with one's own village. The rebirth of the rural civic society at the same time has an influence upon an increase of opportunities of the local rural development.
- Owing to their specialisation and distinctiveness, schools and villages have come into being on the national scale and are close to coming into existence on the global scale.
- In schools, which are working on their specialisation, the traditional division into the student and teacher's roles is disappearing. In projects connected with juggling, pupils became trainers, and they taught teachers as well and showed greater skills than those teachers did. The teachers, while accepting the exchange of roles, changed their attitude towards their pupils, which became more based on partnership. The pupils, taking on the roles of teachers and seeing how difficult it is to learn, improved their communication with them. Thanks to this, school is treated as a value of a local community and so it can do more for the benefit of this community. A positive feedback of the local rural development is started.
- In a village which is specialising, its inhabitants are more willing to learn, are more agreeable, are more willing to cooperate with one another and are more optimistic. It is easier for them to cope with daily difficulties as they have their common goal. Such a goal stimulates and maintains the energy of groups and individuals.

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