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VULNERABILITY IN RURAL AREAS IN HUNGARY

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Abstract. Addressing the interacting economic, social, and environmental problems of rural areas is a key area of regional science. A sectoral approach alone is rarely successful in tackling problems; an interdisciplinary and territorial approach, considering many aspects of analysis, is more likely to produce results. What is needed is an approach in which everyone has something to contribute to rural development in their own area of expertise, and in which these added values can be synergised in development policy practice. Rural development is not just a complex problem, solutions must usually be sought and applied in a context of sharply conflicting interests and values. The last three decades have witnessed an intensification of conflicts, compounded by economic interest structures that tend to negate the issue of long-term sustainability, which significantly reduce the chances of organic rural development. The aim of this study is to outline the nodes that may be factors of rural vulnerability in Hungary.

Keywords: rural areas, Covid-19, countryside, Hungary, resilience

Major economic, environmental, and social shocks always bring new realisations for societies and their citizens, which require new directions for development and action [1.]. The Covid-19 pandemic sweeping the world is causing significant changes in all aspects of life. Different sectors, social groups and peripheral regions are affected in different ways and to different degrees, but typically negatively. The Covid-19 epidemic sweeping across the globe onwards has triggered meaningful transformations in almost all spheres of life, in many ways generating changes in urban-rural relations [2.]. Its impact is different in dynamic metropolitan areas and less developed rural areas. Nevertheless, closures and the re-launch of life and the economy offer many opportunities. The question is to what extent rural municipalities (especially in the municipal, civil and business sectors)

are prepared to see these opportunities, to develop strategies to match them, and to design and implement appropriate projects.

The study focuses on the challenges facing the rural areas, not forgetting the legacy of outstanding Hungarian personalities – Bálint Csátári [3.], Éva G. Fekete [4.], Attila Buday-Sántha [5.] – in rural studies, which still permeates Hungarian rural studies, educational activities, and everyday practice. Several aspects of the changing role of the countryside have emerged over the years, including the adaptability of rural restructuring as an Anglo-Saxon concept and the problems of rural shrinkage. The meaning of the countryside is unchanged, but it is evolving; the society that lives in it is constantly being reshaped (think of rural gentrification, Covid-19, second homes, the emergence of dormitory settlements, etc.) [6.].

In terms of responses to shocks, the rural areas have so far moved rather slowly, as if it did not believe it was changing is necessary. The designation and perception of the countryside have undergone significant changes over the last fifty years. The traditional role of settlements/municipalities was shaped by the modern agricultural mass production, the changed market relations, the new directions of industrialization, the phenomenon of suburbanization, the peripheralization (aging, depopulation). Researchers of the topic [7.] see the biggest problem as the phenomenon was hardly predictable in the region; the devaluation of certain areas of the countryside and the loss of its support capacity have accelerated the social, economic and environmental problems of the countryside.

This is reversed in the current situation, both national policies (family support system, Hungarian Village Programme) and digitalisation have facilitated rural development and increased its vulnerability. It could be said that there have been too many negative impacts on rural areas, both on the settlements and on the people living in them. The most serious problem remains depopulation, which is now a permanent feature of the definition of the countryside in general. Rural concepts have a negative connotation in relation to demographic trends [8.]. Either because they are already included in a composite index of population trends, thus excluding dynamic growth settlements, or more nuanced, for example when the EU's definition [9.] of rural areas is defined on an administrative basis (taking into account population density).

A simplistic preconception can be discerned: a rural area is one which is in decline, which is experiencing significant emigration, which is facing a serious demographic crisis. In comparison, this picture could be treated in a more differentiated way, considering not only the hierarchy of settlements but also their relative geographical location. Unfortunately, the drastic change in Hungary's external migration balance has a negative demographic outcome. In the longer term, we should expect not only a decline in the country's population, but also the depopulation of certain types of regions and settlements. At the same time, the suburbanisation of the capital city and regional centres and the increase in commuter areas have been a trend since 2001.

The current pandemic period has, on the one hand, intensified ongoing trends, i.e. the spread of atypical employment and teleworking, but has not generated a welfare migration phenomenon. Also considering domestic policy influences, positive trends have started in smaller towns, in commuting areas of regional centres with good infrastructure. If anything, the reversal of these processes after the pandemic has passed raises further questions for which the answers are currently unknown. The changed labour market demands and the economic policy following the systemic change resulted in the decrease of the population in Hungarian settlements [10.].

Settlement policy has also greatly influenced the life of the municipalities [11.], and the system of concentration-proximity-convenience [12.] can be considered as the cornerstone of urban development. This (called after the capital letters of the Hungarian terms) 3K criterion system have been complemented by the European Union's rural policy's local economic development based on local values, setting the objective of catching up of disadvantaged areas [13.]. The operation of municipalities and the different scope and quality of public services provided for local economic operators as well as the physical, legal, and local fiscal environment fundamentally influence and determine the development and growth opportunities of the society and the economy of settlements,

or even region types. These opportunities and features are the decisive elements of the country's competitiveness, so the competitiveness of a country cannot be evaluated without assessing the functioning of the local government system.

The vulnerability of rural areas is a key area of investigation in terms of population retention and the survival of the cultural heritage of the area. The heterogeneity of the countryside appears to be a priority when considering the issues of knowledge transfer, cohesion and innovation [14.]. Knowledge transfer can work well in some areas, but in other parts of the country it is not so well in the same way, i.e. there is no single recipe.

Basic education, mental health training and good health are the cornerstones of knowledge transfer in rural areas. In the absence of these three elements, it is impossible to talk about innovation, digitalisation and other modern concepts. Likewise, the cornerstones of knowledge transfer are collaboration, community strength, endogenous development and development based on internal or local resources [15.]. Many innovation efforts in Hungary have run blind alleys "when we thought that it was enough to bring the technology here, copy it and it will work" [16.]. If there is no adaptation alongside innovation that is tailored to the local community, to local needs and to the local problem, it will not work. To give you an example, many greenhouses have been built in Hungary with Dutch technology, under Dutch management, and yet they have not produced the yields that they have in the Netherlands. The answer was very obvious, they did not take into account the number of hours of sunshine, which influenced the technology [16.]. LEADER is known to be able to adapt innovation to peripheral areas through the Community Initiative, but if local knowledge, local know-how and local resources are not available, the desired results will not be achieved. There are countless examples of how copying is not innovation, but it is worth pointing out that the LEADER initiative is a coherent tool across the EU and can mobilise many small local communities in many places [17.].

When we talk about a viable countryside, the first thing we mention is a strong local society that is able and willing to adapt and change. This capacity for change has also led to remarkable transformation in the Covid period. All ages, all forms of social interaction have changed in recent years; we have started to work, think and create together in virtual environments [18.]. In smaller communities, Covid-19 has not brought about a shocking change in all aspects of life. In some rural areas, however, the transition to digitalisation has not been possible for technical reasons (lack of internet connection or signal strength, poor technical equipment, digital illiteracy).

The local society can only function through external forces, external helping NGOs, church organisations, so we should also see the embeddedness of these organisations. In the case of these settlements - mainly based on the examples of Ormánság - it should also be seen that local development is very strongly linked to individuals and organisations, so that with the disappearance of the person/organisation (local hero), there is complete vulnerability [19.]. To counterbalance this, there is a need for a municipal resilience that can provide effective protection against the challenges they face. Resilience is not a state, but a process for which municipalities need to be prepared to respond as quickly and as readily as possible.

A very central feeling of many researchers about resilience is that it covers something that has been discussed for a very long time in social science research [14.], and also in territorial research, in a different context and in a different way. In very general terms, resilience can be likened to the strengthening of the human body's immune system, which is able to respond appropriately when it is adequately prepared for external attacks. To some extent, this concept is a new way of looking at traditional development policy thinking: because it does not say that there are certain resources that if we use them well, we will develop skilfully, but that there will be external obstacles, crises, problems that if we are skilful, we will be able to overcome.

This approach to resilience emphasises continuous learning, in which three central elements were identified: cohesion and interconnectedness (bridging social capital), the pursuit of diversity and the need for autonomy (control and critical resource mass). Development is a complex process, and the success of catching up depends on many factors. Rural areas and rural economies are diverse and dynamic systems. Rural development aims to improve the quality of life of the people who live there,

and therefore the assessment of the performance of the rural economy is a key element in the design of rural development instruments. As rural areas are specific and highly complex natural, economic and social spaces, the local economy in rural areas is always specific. An important area of activity in rural areas is agriculture, but rural areas are by nature multifunctional, which means that, in addition to agricultural production, economic diversification is also necessary but in addition to this economic function, the countryside also has an ecological and social function, cultural and residential functions.

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