

The contemporary stage of the Czech countryside: European integration expectations

Současný stav českého venkova: očekávání evropské integrace

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Abstract: The contemporary Czech countryside underwent an important change during the last ten years. The political, economic and social system of agriculture and rural areas went through a basic transition. We can say that the transformation of agriculture after 1989 is one of the principal milestones of rural development, as for example the agrarian crisis in the end of the 19th century, the land reform in 1919 and the collectivisation in 1949. The processes of restitution and privatisation changed the ownership structure of land and property. The share of rural population employed in agriculture decreased. Unemployment grew, offer of work opportunities and possibilities decreased in turn. Social, civic and religious life regenerated. There are many new organizations and institutions, open borders cause positive as well as negative events. The Czech countryside comes near to European rural areas in many aspects. However, there is a considerable differentiation of approach to one's own future. Some social groups of rural population were strongly affected by the transformation, especially people with low qualification, poor health, socially handicapped, less adaptable, and incapable of retraining. On the other hand, for other social groups opened so interesting options of employment or enterprise which were not even thinkable of before 1989. The standard of living, life style and attitudes of rural inhabitants differentiate. Results of a nation-wide research, "Trends of Social Change in Agriculture and Rural Areas", predicate main changes in the economic and social spheres. Detailed knowledge of economic and social processes of the Czech countryside is necessary for co-operation within the framework of the European Union.

Key words: Czech countryside, rural areas, agriculture, rural development, changes in the countryside

Abstrakt: Současný český venkov prošel v posledních deseti letech podstatnou změnou, která zásadně ovlivnila jeho politický, ekonomický a sociální systém. Dá se říci, že transformaci zemědělství po roce 1989 je možné chápat jako jeden z podstatných milníků rozvoje venkova, obdobně jako agrární krizi na konci 19. století či pozemkovou reformu v roce 1919 a kolektivizaci zemědělství v roce 1949. Procesy restituace a privatizace změnily strukturu vlastnictví k půdě a nemovitostem. Klesl podíl venkovského obyvatelstva zaměstnaného v zemědělství, zvýšila se nezaměstnanost, nabídka pracovních příležitostí a možností se dramaticky snížila. Sociální, občanský a náboženský život se obnovuje, vznikají nové organizace a instituce. Dění na venkově je pozitivně i negativně ovlivňováno také otevřením hranic. Český venkov se v mnoha aspektech přibližuje evropským venkovským oblastem. Jakkoliv je přístup k vlastní budoucnosti značně rozdílný, život některých sociálních skupin venkovské populace je transformací ovlivněn. Jedná se především o obyvatele s nižší kvalifikací, tělesně a sociálně hendikepované, obyvatele méně adaptabilní a neschopné rekvalifikace. Na druhé straně pro ostatní sociální skupiny se otevřely zajímavé podmínky pro zaměstnání a podnikání, které nebyly před rokem 1989 myslitelné. Životní úroveň, životní styl a postoje venkovských obyvatel se diferencují. Výsledky celorepublikového výzkumu „Trendy sociálních změn v zemědělství a na venkově“ podpořily hlavní změny v ekonomické a sociální sféře. Podrobné znalosti ekonomických a sociálních procesů českého venkova jsou nezbytné pro spolupráci v rámci Evropské unie.

Klíčová slova: český venkov, venkovský prostor, zemědělství, rozvoj venkova, změny na venkově

INTRODUCTION

Czech agriculture and countryside is undergoing profound changes during the last ten years, which impact the rural population life and work considerably. The whole complex of changes, namely land and property ownership changes, privatisation and transformation of production enterprises can be evaluated as such an important milestone in our history, as there were in the past for example the origin of independent Czechoslovakia, land reforms or the collectivisation of agriculture.

The present development has also its pros and cons and it goes on in consequent steps. The restitution and privatisation processes have changed again considerably the ownership structure of the countryside and agriculture, the share of rural population employed in agriculture is decreasing considerably, unemployment grows, the offer of job opportunities and possibilities changes, the way of living of the rural and agricultural population is changing as well, the religious, social and political life is gradually re-generating.

New economic and social institutions are emerging, the open border evokes both positive and negative social phenomena and processes – the possibility of free travelling, shopping, education, trade, labour, the language knowledge growth, learning about foreign countries, but on the other hand also increase of prostitution and the connected criminal activities, growth of drug abuse and drug traffic, emergence of new kinds of criminal activity like people smuggling, black labour etc.

Sociological researches performed by our workplace (Majerová V. et al. 2000) reflect the present state of Czech countryside. We will mention here in more detail some of the work and life of the rural population characteristics, which can be considered as important for the future development in the common Europe.

EMPLOYMENT IN RURAL AREAS

Employment in rural areas belongs among the disputed questions. We know its shares in the individual countries, but a more detailed information on its structure in rural areas is investigated gradually, namely through different sociological research methods. The unemployment growth after 1989 was influenced by different factors. Disintegration of big agricultural enterprises (both state and co-operative) and their consequent privatisation and transformation brought about decrease of employment. The number of permanent workers in agricultural primary production fell down to almost one third. Finding a new job is one of the most difficult tasks for a former farmer because of their higher age average, lower education level, state of health, narrow specialisation at certain professions and jobs, lower adaptability and also habits connected with a certain way of work and life closely tied to natural environment.

Even if the large-scale agriculture approached the industrial way of work in many aspects, the majority of farmers also kept their personal subsistence husbandry and a very narrow relationship to nature was preserved, as the way of life researches show. This need of contact with nature (animals, plants, countryside) strengthened the considerable stability in the place of abode. The possibility to have one's own house, garden, subsistence plot and farm animals belonged and still belongs among the highly evaluated life values.

Another factor influencing unemployment were bankruptcies or dampening programs of the big factories and industrial complexes, which had employed the commuting rural population. Commuting to job was and still is wide-spread in the CR and more than half population of the rural municipalities up to 2000 inhabitants solves their job participation in this way. Similarly as with agricultural professions, also here the problem is a high share of workers with narrow specialisation, in the age, when re-qualification or adaptation to another working regime in different conditions is difficult. Income conditions in industry, mining, metallurgy etc. were much more advantageous for qualified workers, than those offered by the

present labour market in the rural space. Besides, the mentioned huge complexes tied also a great deal of ancillary and administration jobs for medium and less qualified workers, of part-time jobs and so on. Thus, there occurs a considerable unbalance between demand and supply of labour, both on the local and regional level. The more one-side oriented the region used to be, the more difficult the situation is, because labour market includes many unemployed persons of the same or similar profession.

The job opportunities loss of the countryside is also influenced by the continual price growth and the simultaneous reduction of the public transport net (both of trains and of busses). With the growing prices of petrol, also commuting by own car is not sustainable any longer. For the low income part of the population, commuting to job has become a not advantageous solution, where income from job does not compensate the time loss and other costs connected with working outside the place of living.

Thus, rural population has changed its labour habits considerably during the last ten years. There emerged changing of jobs, part-time jobs, but also early retirements, unemployment with social payment support, re-qualification, different kinds of subsidiary and opportunity jobs, commuting over the border to Germany and Austria, and also "grey" economics – undercover jobs with the simultaneous social payments. Up to now, it seems that moving after a job in the frame of the CR has not developed considerably. The reason obviously is, that the non-stabilised labour market does not indicate, that permanent moving over to another part of the republic would mean a long-term, or even life-long, labour certainty. Of course, big cities are an exception – they always attracted part of the active, namely young, population, for which they offered not only a wider scale of interesting job opportunities, but also a cultural and social background.

Labour participation of rural population

Economic activity of the CR population was and is high in the long-term international comparison (60.2% in 2001/I.). Even if the retirement age level is increasing gradually, it is still lower than the European average. After the division of Czechoslovakia in 1993, the employment level has developed in a different way in both independent republics. In 2000, it was in average 6.5% in the CR and 12.5% in the SR. The numbers of permanent workers in agriculture are decreasing accordingly in both republics (Trnková 2001).

Closer information on working conditions and job opportunities of rural population can be acquired only from sociological researches. The representative nation-wide research "Trends of social changes in agriculture and countryside" (Majerová et al. 2000) shows, that there prevail persons in the position of employee (42.1%) and those not working any more, namely the old-age pen-

Table 1. Development of the numbers of workers in agriculture in the CR and SR in the period 1989–2000

Average number of registered workers (per 1 000 of persons)												
Year	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
CR	333	514	411	312	271	247	222	217	214	201	191	190
SR	351	·	263	·	179	·	144	132	118	106	89	80

Source: RIAE Prague – MA CR
SO SR (Buchta 2001)

sioners and disabled persons (27.3%). In the remaining categories of labour participation, there are represented private entrepreneurs without employees (5.9 %), private entrepreneurs with employees (1.9 %) and other categories. The category of “unemployed” was represented in the set by 6.8%. However, the regional differences in the share of unemployed persons are considerable.

Men prevail among the employees, entrepreneurs as well as private farmers. Women have majority among the pensioners and unemployed. More than half of the unemployed are younger than 35 years.

Reasons of unemployment are different, there occur explanations like: I was fired, the enterprise reduced numbers of employees, I could not commute, my income was too low, I was not accepted back after the maternity leave, my qualification is insufficient, I have not got sufficient practice, I have got to take care of my ill parents etc.

Employment possibilities

The scale of employment in the rural municipalities was and is very wide. In the open question regarding present occupation (the last performed occupation in the case of unemployed persons and pensioners), there emerged 308 different types of occupation.

For rural areas, a very wide scale of professions and occupations is typical – from the highly qualified jobs (medical doctors, teachers, researchers, managers, freelance artists, computer specialists) through medium-qualified ones (drivers, repair and maintenance technicians, artisans, accountants, nurses) to the totally unqualified job possibilities (Figure 1).

From the individual branches of economic activities, the most often mentioned ones are agriculture and forestry, retail trade, constructing, metal industry, education,

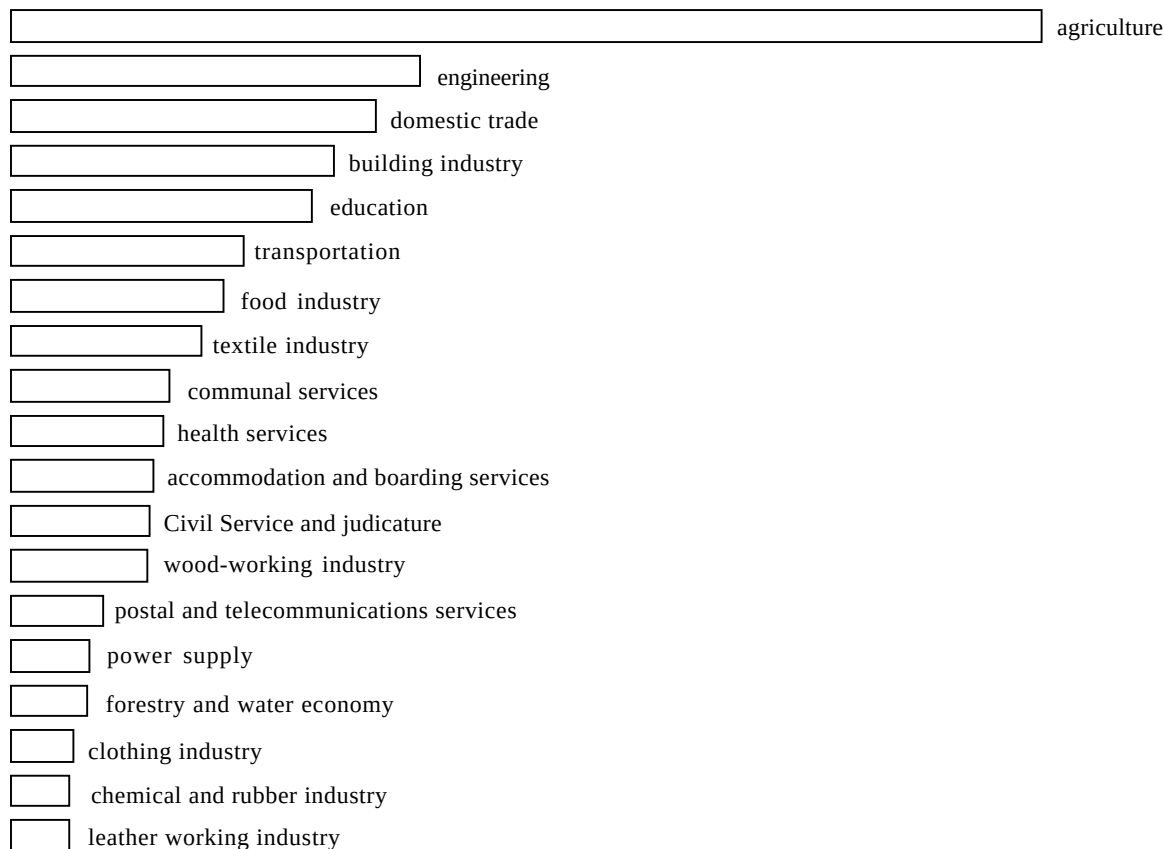


Figure1. The most frequent branches of rural population employment

public administration, health and social services, transport, textile industry, food industry and other.

Ownership structure of enterprises

Prior to 1989, the major part of the followed country population was employed in state enterprises (47.7%). Another ownership type, in which the respondents worked, were co-operatives (15%). In smaller shares, they were also employed by other types of enterprises: budgetary organisations (2.8%), non-profit government-supported organisations (0.6%), joint-stock companies (1%) and other organisations and enterprises.

Today, the ownership structure of enterprises in which the respondents are working is totally different. The sequence of the biggest owners is as follows: there are prevailing joint-stock companies, physical bodies enterprises, limited liability companies, then there follow state-owned enterprises and co-operative enterprises. A smaller share is held by budgetary organisations, non-profit and government-supported organisations public business and commandite companies.

As a result of privatisation and transformation, the main changes occurred namely in the state and co-operative ownership and consequently the share of the physical bodies ownership was growing. According to the research results, the share of persons employed in state enterprises decreased from 47.7% to 9.6%, in co-operatives from 15% to 8.2%. And vice versa, the share of persons employed in the enterprises of physical bodies (including own enterprises) increased from 0.3% to 14.9%.

The opportunities of better working participation have opened for part of the rural population, while they have closed for the others. Some of them are earning much more than before, have interesting and well qualified jobs, feel understanding with their colleagues and have good relationship with their superiors. Another part of respondents is afraid of losing their jobs, does not feel the secure working prospective and does not trust their superiors. However, competitive relationships among co-workers do not show in any considerable way.

Interest in business activities

The majority of questioned rural population (82.6%) do not consider starting business. Only less than 4% are decided to do business and about 5% more are not yet sure, whether to start it or not (in total, 194 out of 2 142 respondents). That is only a little more than the average of unemployed persons in rural areas, it is, however, not certain whether the two groups are identical. Quite the opposite, it is much more probable, that those who are relatively successful in their jobs feel a need of independence and would have the courage to start their own firms.

The sectors in which the respondents would eventually decide to start business are very diverse. The respondents are realistic in considering the strong and weak points of the rural space and the profit possibilities of the business. The niches in the country retail net can be compensated by small shops, mostly with food and mixed goods, other business opportunities are offered by agriculture, transport, constructing, accommodation and catering and food industry. Other considerations issue from the local opportunities or the lack of the given service in the neighbourhood.

A relatively successful can be also business activities in book-keeping and, in the border areas, money-exchange. Otherwise, the space of Czech countryside does not offer, with the exception of the sports or tourism attractive localities, many other advantageous opportunities.

Hitherto, the situation in rural area was not such that the rural population would have to depend on its own initiative. To keep a job was surely more important than to leave it and start a way of living with uncertain results.

Private entrepreneurship was abolished in this country for approximately 40 years. The present young generation grows up in the market environment again, but it does not remember any more the business climate to which the life of the whole family was submitted, neither does it know the models of business co-operation in family. On the other hand, the present business activities are quite different. The need of quick reaction to demand, introduction of new technologies (namely Internet), a considerable change of business rules and the legal frame (sometimes also their incompleteness or absenting) form the conditions for inter-generation misunderstanding.

The complex evaluation of business conditions in the countryside is rather sceptical. In their opinions, there are reflected problems of the nation-wide importance – negative balance of the government budget and the following structure of state expenditures (subsidies), low purchasing power of the population and insufficient market space. The purchasing power naturally depends from the average incomes of population and the share of the unemployed. In the border areas, the capital and the bigger cities, the structure and level of revenues are influenced by tourism. On the other hand, Czech population spends a part of its incomes in the near-border areas of Germany and Austria, namely in the time of discount sales. With those basic problems, there is connected the perceived lack of business opportunities in the countryside and migration of the young and active labour, which does not find opportunities to the fulfilment of their working ambitions in the rural areas.

Village inhabitants derive the improvement of business conditions and the total business climate in rural areas from the total financial situation of the state. There is not reflected a very strong criticism of the business legislation, even if also there can be found the disincentive of business activities. Clarification and higher obligation of

the business rules for all business subjects, regardless of the ownership form and size of the enterprise, would undoubtedly improve the business conditions in rural areas.

FREE TIME

The scope and content of the rural population free time depends on many factors: the distance between the working and living place, type of accommodation, the area of the garden and personal plot, cultural, social and sporting opportunities supplied by the municipality and the close surroundings, infrastructure and accessible services, the structure of the family and household, level of living, education, hobbies, financial possibilities and other. Spending of the free time also reflects the traditional division of roles in the family, relationships to the relatives and neighbours, customs and habits, emotional ties to the municipality and region.

During the weekdays, the free time activities are not very diverse. There prevails listening to the KZE radio, watching TV, reading newspapers and magazines, working in the household, garden and personal husbandry (Kudrna 2000). Other frequent activities are childcare, reading books, mutual visits and different handwork. Frequent is also a visit of a pub (Figure 2).

The weekend activities are similar, only their sequence and scope are different. Listening to the radio and TV and reading of newspaper and magazines remains on the top positions, more time is spent, however, by visiting the relatives and neighbours, walks, trips, playing games with children, visits of church and churchyard, labours in household and personal plot, for which there were not enough time during the week, and the passive resting.

In spending holidays, rural population differs from the urban by a lower mobility. A high per cent of the respon-

dents spent their last holiday in the CR, and that either in the place of their abode, in the own summer cottage or in the home recreation establishment. There were probably several reasons for that. Some families have to save money and travelling outside home or outside their own summer cottage is too money demanding for them. Part of the rural population spends its holiday by the maintenance or improving of their estates and have no wish for a travelling or restful holiday. Leaving home is also complicated by the fact, that during the summer months, it is necessary to water the garden, to harvest fruit and vegetables and to take care of the animals. Also, there are often differences in opinion regarding the way of spending holiday between men and women, which sometimes lead to the decision not to leave home at all. Children usually have possibilities to spend part of the summer holiday at the summer camps of different orientation.

During the first years after 1989, travelling, namely to the European countries, was a very favourite activity. Travel agencies went through a boom, individuals as well as families repeatedly went for the one-day shopping trips or several- days sight-seeing trips. Positively perceived was also the possibility of free money exchange and opening an account in foreign currency. The war in the former Yugoslavia limited travelling to the Balkan, but on the other hand, the number of Czech tourists in Italy, Greece, Spain, France and other countries increased.

At present, the situation has rather stabilised. There are still less of those, who just want to see what it looks like abroad. The one-day shopping trips and trips to the sea-side and to the mountains still belong among the favourite ones. The rural population level of living is considerably differentiated, so that, beside the social groups which do not travel even during the holidays for financial reasons, there live people with no financial limitations and if those do not spend for travelling, it is either because they are not interested or they are limited

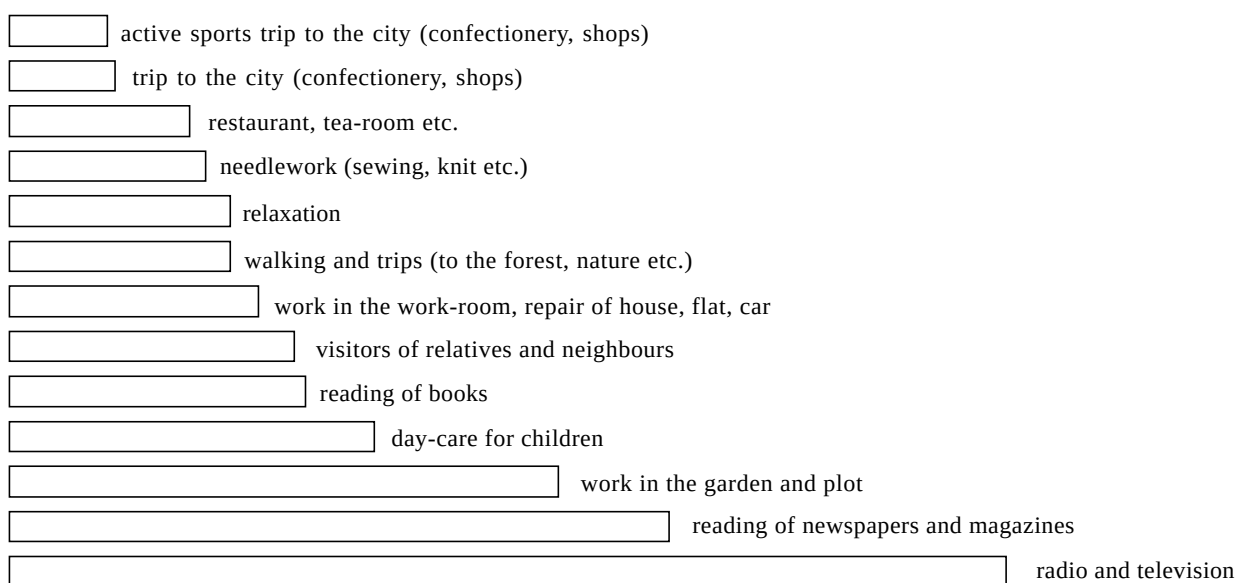


Figure2. The most frequent activities of leisure time

by health or other family and personal reasons. Interest limits regarding travelling during holiday are rather clearly set by age.

Older people (age 55+) prefer spending their holiday at home or in their own summer cottage. Neither do the middle-aged people travel too often during the holiday. On the contrary, the younger age groups of rural population state all forms of spending holiday, from staying home to different sorts of organised trips.

Young people and families with children (with the exception of the well-to-do groups of rural population) usually do not have large financial sums to their disposal, but often also their demands are not high. In travelling, they utilise their own means of transport including bikes, eat modestly and chose cheaper accommodation in private, in tents, cabins etc. With a certain modesty, they can thus afford even the sea-side and mountain trips. However, they are not any too well liked by the owners of hotels, restaurants and entertainment facilities.

EVALUATION OF THE CHANGES IN SOCIETY

The changes rural society went through during the last ten years influence logically the opinions and attitudes of rural population. Those, who lived to see the restitution of property, civil rehabilitation, removing of the wrongdoings, restoration of the religious and club life, travelling and other opportunities this society offers, are usually satisfied and willing to tolerate certain misgivings in the economic, political and social life of the state, eventually also to take part in their removing.

Another part of the rural population is put into a more difficult life situations by those changes, than they found themselves before. They have lost the hitherto securities as well as some illusions, they are depressed by the perpetual fear of losing job and they cannot adapt easily to the changed situation in work and civil life. In their evaluation, criticism prevails over tolerance.

For a certain share of rural population, the life perspectives have closed. The most frequent reasons are the low or missing qualification, age, state of health, non-adaptability, unwillingness to take part in improving the public matters.

The complex data then express the prevailing attitudes. From the changes after 1989, the best evaluated (by more than half of the respondents) are the possibilities of private business, free travelling abroad, better education opportunities, the possibility of free expressing opinions in public and in press, possibilities of personal career without a compulsory membership in political party, private property restitution, possibilities of return for the emigrants, origin of new clubs and movements and restoration of religious life.

At the time of the research (1998), the prepared EU accession and NATO membership did not provoke much interest, on the other hand, division of the former Czechoslovakia and changes of government were perceived as negative (Maříková 2000).

In the agreement or disagreement of respondents with the submitted statements, there was reflected the inconsistency of our time. More than a half of the respondents agreed, that it is right that an able and diligent person should be richer than others, that he/she has opportunities for distinguishing and that the life success depends mainly on the honest and conscientious work. But at the same time and almost as often as the former, there was expressed agreement with the statement that a common citizen has nowhere to appeal against injustice, that it is impossible to get rich by a honest way and that success depends mainly on knowing the important and influential people.

The highest indecision (i.e. small differences between the attitudes of agreement and disagreement) was observed with regard to the questions, whether the NATO membership ensures us higher security, whether the EU membership will be rather advantageous, whether our children have a better future perspectives than we had and whether life opportunities of the respondent are now higher than before 1989.

The respondents expressly did not agree with the statements, that the government should supervise an equal redistribution of wealth among people, that a rigorous person will always reach justice and that a citizen can influence the public course of events and politics by his/her deeds and attitudes.

THE NEAREST LIFE GOALS

Life goals of rural population could be called very conservative and banal, but, on the other hand, it is obvious, that they contain all that what is really important in life and independent on political and economic changes: finding and keeping the life partner, nice housing, a circle of dependable friends, upbringing of children, financial security, peaceful and satisfactory life. In comparison with the mentioned values, own success, be it in business, social or political, gets into the background (Figure 3).

The differences between men and women are relatively small, but quite logical. For men, the career and provision of the family are of importance besides the satisfactory family life, for women, upbringing and education of children are more important than career.

It can be supposed, that life goals are changing with age. However, finding and keeping the life partner is put to the first place by all age groups in agreement, even if it is obvious, that looking for a partner is of different meaning in the young age, another is the opinion of partner co-existence of the middle-aged people with adult children, who have perhaps already lived in marriage and then got divorced or widowed, and another sense has the life in couple for old people, who often suffer by the lack of contacts with friends and relatives and their life partner means everything for them. Loss of the partner in the old age is regarded as one of the heaviest emotional burdens.

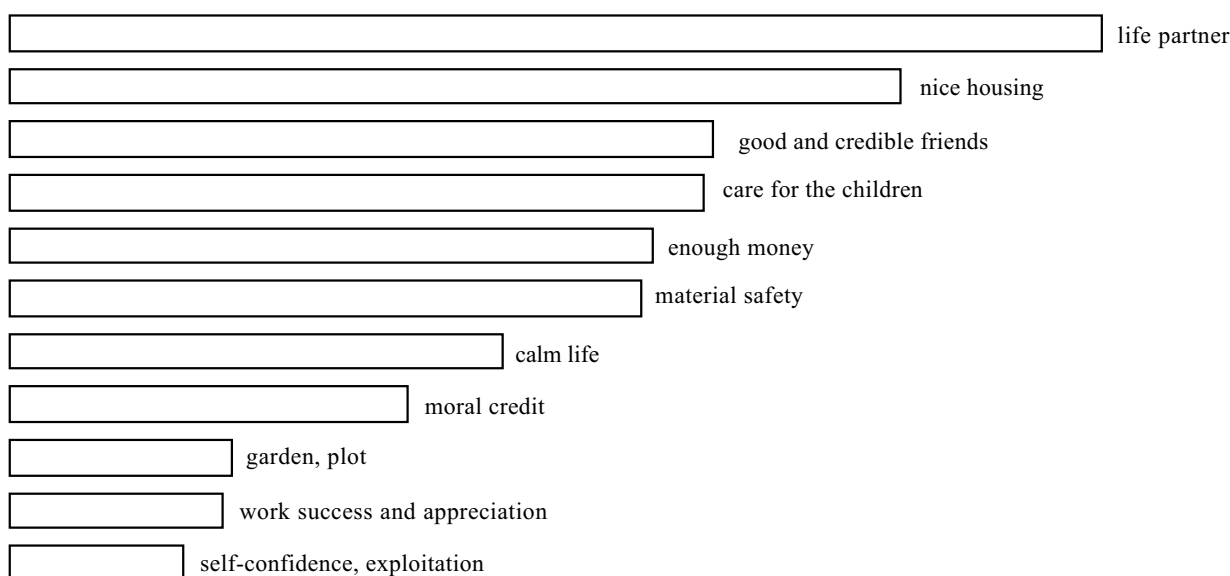


Figure 3. The most important life goals

Housing belongs among the important life values. In the countryside, the most highly evaluated is living in a family house or in a re-constructed farm estate with own garden, with the possibility to keep own subsistence farmstead, a home workshop, eventually other utilities (a smoking-chamber, fruit-drying chamber etc).

CONCLUSIONS

The changes of Czech countryside cannot be regarded as finished. However, some of the stereotypes emerging in connection with countryside and agriculture are imbedded in our minds and persist without regard to the changing reality.

It is traded, that Czech village was fully dependent on high governmental subsidies which conditioned functioning of the large-scale agricultural enterprises. By the decrease of subsidies and the transformation of agricultural enterprises with the subsequent reduction of agricultural labour, village population lost its basic means of living, from what it recovers only with difficulties. Our sociological researches testify about a considerable differentiation of the farm workers attitude to their own future.

However, rural areas were never fully dependent on agriculture, commuting after work into the nearest municipalities and towns has always exceeded the fifty per cent level with the economically active population. Transformation has impacted negatively certain social groups, namely the less qualified or non-qualified people, with health or social handicaps, unable of re-qualification and less adaptable. Other social groups of rural population, the educated, able of re-qualification and enterprising ones, have oriented quickly regardless of the age and they are fully satisfied with the present situation.

The fears of a considerable lowering of the rural population life level were not confirmed. We can speak of considerable social differences, which in average lead to increasing the level of living, however. Neither has the identification of the own household with different groups of households regarding the level of living indicated that the rural population would perceive a subjective deterioration of its situation.

In the media, there is often applied the argument that social differentiation brings about non-satisfaction, the consequence of which is a strong left political orientation of the rural population. If we look into the results of the question regarding membership in a political party, it will prove, that the level of the respondents political membership is low: about 10%, among which there prevail members of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia with 2.5%, members of the Christian Democratic Union with 1.8%. Other political parties are represented by the shares lower than 1%. This does not mean, however, that the rural population is without political opinions. The results of the last elections are roughly in agreement with the election preferences allocation in the CR – the sequence is the Social Democratic Party, the Civic Democratic Party, the Christian Democratic Union, the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia and the Union of Freedom. The regional differences are of more importance than the difference between the rural and urban areas.

The pessimists have foretold, that restitutions would cause a deterioration of human relationships in the village. In reality, restitutions did not mean a basic change of the ownership relations and the way of life of the village population either from the economic or social point of view. The restituted properties were mainly small and in many cases the profit did not compensate the problems regarding the management and maintenance of the property.

Restitutions in the countryside regarded mainly land and other agricultural property. Both is now utilised mainly to the original purpose, because there are not many other possibilities. Without doubt, there has also emerged envy, hostility and disappointment. However, the results of the research do not speak about basic disagreements among people which would have been evoked by restitutions.

We could continue further in a similar way, to prove and explain certain not precise or false ideas. These are, to a great extent, supported by the not very precise work of the media, which – if they pay attention to the rural problematics at all – prefer sensational news and dramatically accented presuppositions before the rather dull news coverage regarding the everyday small work and its results. The local communities economic and social consolidation is not the question of several years, but a long-term process. The local representations are learning to work and co-operate under different conditions and in different environment than in past. The face of the village will surely still change considerably.

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