

THE ROLE OF RURAL COMMUNITY ENHANCING RURAL SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE CHANGES

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Abstract

This article presents analysis of the role of rural community in enhancement and implementation of changes in rural social infrastructure. Rural social infrastructure is a key part of rural social and economic system, the development level of which predetermines satisfaction of needs of rural residents, fulfilment of their range of choices and alternatives. The main objective of this article is to deploy the fact that application of “bottom-up” approach could stimulate rural community to make decision intended for promotion of positive changes when straining after the attractiveness of their locations through the rational development of social infrastructure facilities, supply of target, high-quality and multiple services. The following research question has been addressed – what is the potential contribution of rural community towards promotion of changes in social infrastructure of rural areas. The research aim is to disclose the role of rural community in enhancement of rural social infrastructure changes. An anonymous survey using questionnaire was implemented in five pilot rural areas and the summary of results is presented.

It has been determined that activity and citizenship of rural community in assumption of liabilities for the wellbeing of all rural residents predefines the relevancy of their decisions and opinions before the local authorities and other concerned local or regional institutions. Consequently, the challenge for mentioned rural development actors is to identify or recognise the constraints on rural community participation in forming social infrastructure at local level, and to develop and enable specific initiatives in their favour.

Key words: rural community, community needs, rural social infrastructure, rural development.

Introduction

Structural changes in Lithuanian society are directly related to changes faced by rural residents and rural areas, which, in turn, are contingent on the rural social infrastructure development level and on the demand of residents for services provided by different segments. Rural social infrastructure comprises various, mostly public, services, provided by different SI actors: e.g., educational institutions, medical authorities, police forces, domestic service providers, post offices, suppliers of transportation services, etc. (Atkočiūnienė et al., 2015). It shall be noted that changes in rural areas based on population ageing problem influence the importance of RSI services and their perception as being the essential factor of rural area viability. This statement could be supplemented by the research results, performed by G.Kuliešius ir D.Vidickienės (2008) concerning the dependence of the availability of all services without any exceptions on the increasing population densities in rural areas. It is certain that structure of rural community plays the main role in forming rural social infrastructure services which influences the functioning of them as well. Development of rural social infrastructure increases choices, sustains positive attitudes, improves the function of institutions, creates better conditions and enhances quality of life (Cavaye, 2001; Paslaugų..., 2007). B.V. Gopalakrishna, D.S. Leelavathi (2011) pointed out that social infrastructure directly and most efficiently impacts rural issues like poverty, social exclusion and the whole human development within the living areas of such people. If the existing rural social infrastructure complies

with the needs and expectations of rural community – the higher quality of life of rural residents is achieved; if social infrastructure does not satisfy needs of residents or create choice range – particular social and economic issues influencing the wellbeing of the community occur. In terms of sustainable development of rural areas, the wellbeing of current and future rural residents could not be distinguished from the satisfaction of comprehensive needs which are generally preconditioned by the rural social infrastructure. The need to provide basic amenities of life has now become essential thing while improving humans’ wellbeing. Contribution of local community to forming rural social infrastructure and rural development on the whole is significant though not always evaluated properly. Accordingly, the *scientific problem* solved in this article is described as whether the active rural community promotes changes in rural social infrastructure. *The research object* is to examine the features of rural community in enhancement of rural social infrastructure changes. *The research aim* is to disclose the role of rural community in enhancement of rural social infrastructure changes. *The research tasks* are as follows: 1) to reveal the importance of rural community’s activity promoting rural social infrastructure changes; 2) to explore rural community’s needs and attitudes for rural social infrastructure changes.

The major part of scientific works (Flora and Flora, 1993; Suharto et al., 2010; Gopalakrishna and Leelavathi, 2011; Planning..., 2012) disclose the necessity of revealing rural areas changes to be initiated by the rural community, i.e., local residents.

Initiatives promoting the development of rural areas in Europe such as “Leader” (The bottom-up approach) acknowledge relevancy of the “bottom up” approach while reaching after the social progress maintained by the involvement of society in rural area changes initiation processes as well as encouraging process of local participation in every aspect of development. Participation was considered to be a basic human right (Chifamba, 2013). Rural community participation in decision making is important for local democracy and for the quality of decisions taken in regard the development affecting the life and future of rural communities and economies (Women..., 2000). Rural community’s activity or vitality, as J.M. Cavaye (2001) pointed out, also relies on communities “rethinking” assets, developing networks, building local cooperation and acting on local passion and motivation. It is known that community – driven development in rural development context is the key factor which influences improvements in all life domains (social, economic, cultural, and political, etc.). However, the case of paradox appears in this case – on the one hand, activity of rural community is deemed as a key factor in reaching the enhanced wellbeing, on the other hand, sometimes opinion of local residents remains unknown to local authorities and main actors are not able to encourage or join the initiative to change present situation. Such kind of a duality leads rural communities to strengthening their opinions or conversely, detracts their role in initiation of urgent changes. It is considered that, advanced communities could direct other communities that could not attract sufficient attention of the authorities or other actors concerned. According to B.V. Gopalakrishna, D.S. Leelavathi (2011), public action is an important component of any strategy to achieve higher levels of human development.

Community participation is considered as an imperative feature for success and prosperity of rural development (Chifamba, 2013), therefore the RSI development demand is based on the activity of rural residents in employing SI services. It could be said that needs of active, smart, engaged in recent development, conscious in activities of different social groups community are generally satisfied by favourably developed SI. G. Kuliešis ir D. Vidickienė (2008) stated that small local market shall be perceived as a vital factor preventing business initiatives to develop service sector in rural areas. Accordingly, rural residents are subjected to less favourable conditions comparing to those, living in bigger cities, and, as a result, the entire community, showing passive attitude towards changes, innovations, omitting needs of its members for RSI services could hardly achieve positive result, namely, the required SI services.

Community usually is defined as a group of people who has something in common, so understanding active rural community in broader terms, it can be characterized by various features. Scientific literature based on various reports and researches (Flora and Flora, 1993; Cavaye, 2001; Suharto et al., 2010; Gopalakrishna and Leelavathi, 2011) reveals that active rural community is the community, satisfying or implementing the following socially determined roles:

- innovative (generate initiatives);
- integrating or empowering (respect ideas and people, recognise the existence of diverse needs);
- flexible;
- smart;
- emphatic;
- socially sensitive;
- socially responsible (socially safe);
- enabling reliance upon members of rural community and neighborhood;
- best organisation of development players/actors;
- creating attractive living environment (place shaping).

If it is required to highlight the fact that active community shall be responsible for its activities and reached changes in full, the following evidences undermining and limiting rural communities struggle to enhance changes revealed by Cavaye J.M. (2001) shall be provided:

- they cannot change an issue because it is outside their influence, or they do not have the resources or assistance, etc.;
- they do not want to change – have enough;
- they do not know how to change – they lack the direction, organisation or expertise to take action;
- they think they cannot change.

Following above mentioned, the activity of rural community is usually restricted not for its own reasons, but also by others. J.M. Cavaye (2001) and E. Chifamba (2013) discussed one more issue – what if the community sees only constraints, not the opportunities? One of the dangers of any community assessment is the tendency to look only at a community’s problems or deficiencies. Problem-oriented assessments tend to ignore resources and solutions that may be found within a community. Previous ideas confirm that rural communities while providing their active role also in forming rural social infrastructure must be strong and positive thinking. In order to be active or effective, rural community assessments should be systematic, involve a wide variety of community members, and engage people in a meaningful way. Accordingly, community participation is therefore an active engagement of individuals and groups to change problematic conditions and to influence policies and

programmes that affect the quality of their lives or the lives of others (Skinner, 1997; Chifamba, 2013).

Summarizing the above-mentioned, it can be noted that when emphasizing the rural community role in enhancement of rural social infrastructure major part of steps are related to the achievement of pre-determined goals. Various problems and restrictions that obstruct the activity of rural community should strengthen capabilities of rural people and create greater self-reliance finding out new ways for rural social infrastructure changes and improvement.

Materials and Methods

This article is based on implementing analysis and synthesis of scientific literature, logic and systematic analysis, applying questioning method. A growing number of international organisations and scientists emphasises advantages of subjective assessment along with the assessment of objective conditions (Veenhoven, 2009; Vaznonienė, 2011; Durand, 2011; OECD, 2013; National..., 2013). Rural community wellbeing depends on the opinion of its members, their needs and objectives raised. In this context the most considerable role is played by the subjective assessment of rural community able to disclose individual point of view regarding the behaviour of the community when achieved better life and enhancing rural social infrastructure.

The objective evaluation of rural social infrastructure sectors (education, training, consultancy; communications and telecommunications; utilities and municipal services; transportation; culture, sports, recreation; trade and public catering services; health and social security; personal and property protection) was done in five points scale (1 means very bad evaluation; 5 means very good evaluation). Each sector included a particular number of social infrastructure indicators which characterise the sector's situation (Atkočiūnienė et al., 2015).

Subjective opinion of the individual, its assessment and needs declares both current conditions and preconditions the future state irrespective of the assessment object (Stiglitz et al., 2009). It could be stated that subjective opinion involves the assessment of life and life conditions performed by individuals themselves, assessment of their perception of persons living nearby, and their feelings about the place they are living in. Advantages and importance of rural community subjective assessment in achieving RSI changes are based on the following reasons (Compendium..., 2011; Durand, 2013; OECD, 2013; Atkočiūnienė et al., 2015):

- they not only assess objective conditions, but also help in determining things important for rural residents;

- they disclose varying level of community needs development and their satisfaction directions;
- they highlight attitudes of various social groups towards RSI assessment;
- they reveal opinion of rural residents being the consumers about the demand for RSI services;
- they discover priorities of residents involved in enhancement of standards of living and wellbeing;
- they emphasise the important role of social relations in meeting the needs, promote social integration and involvement;
- they point out priorities of existing and future solutions related to RSI development;
- they assist in finding of innovative decision making processes when solving existing problems and enable the determination of particular means to be applied for problem solving;
- they supplement the data of already performed qualitative researches;
- they promote social cohesion and concentrate efforts of actors from various sectors in enhancement of SI.

Needs of rural residents as well as opportunities to satisfy them are one of the most important factors, affecting the demand and supply of RSI services. Needs of rural community being the social determinants of higher wellbeing could motivate, stimulate or limit SI development.

In order to determine needs of residents and RSI conditions, we have drafted the anonymous questionnaire (50 questions), which was used to generalise collected data without mentioning specific answers of respondents. Main diagnostic blocks of the questionnaire have been developed to identify respondents' opinion regarding current RSI conditions and existing deficiencies of RSI facilities as well as to clarify the attractiveness of residential area for living, working, investment, and indicate relevant problems of various areas in terms of local residents' opinion. Involvement of local residents in the query has enabled us to form a foresight and decide on active participation of rural community in straining after RSI changes. Some social demographic characteristics of respondents (e.g., including themselves to a particular social group), identification of local community peculiarities, answers to open questions regarding RSI changes enabled it to glimpse a level of activity shown or to be showed by participants when initiating RSI projects, creating a favoured rural area.

This research performed applying probability (random) selection methodology, to be more exact, we have applied a cluster analysis. Since the key role was dedicated to rural communities, the selection of geographical regions as a type of cluster analysis has been selected. Selected pilot areas (5 of them: Alytus

Table 1

Subjective and objective evaluation of rural social infrastructure sectors in Lithuania, 2014, in scores

Evaluation method	Social infrastructure sectors							
	Education, training, consultancy	Communications and tele-communications	Utilities and municipal services	Transportation	Culture, sports, recreation	Trade and public catering services	Health and social security	Personal and property protection
Average of respondents subjective evaluation in pilot areas	3.39	3.82	3.38	3.05	3.09	3.07	3.14	2.95
Average of objective evaluation	2.56	3.36	2.57	2.44	2.68	2.33	2.39	2.28

distr., Kedainiai distr., Kaisiadorys distr., Pasvalys distr. and Rietavas municipality) complied with specified criteria of applied method and showed the following distinctions: there are particular differences in rural residents, they are in different regions, and districts consist of townships, some of them of small towns and villages. In terms of the present research, selection of respondent from pilot areas was set as N=1023 (Atkočiūnienė et al., 2015). Data and calculations gained in the course of this research have been processed by using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 20 and Ms Excel programmes.

Results and Discussion

Performed research of the need of rural communities for rural social infrastructure services has revealed a wide range of results. Rather broad selection (N-1023) enabled to make particular assumptions regarding both the areas of high importance to individual rural residents and rural communities in terms of enhancement of rural social infrastructure. Since the research task of the article has been related to the determination of the role of community in achieving rural social infrastructure changes, several research aspects shall be provided.

Most of mentioned above authors acknowledge that there are many challenges to promoting active changes in a rural area. When we discuss how rural community can provide and be proud of its activity, we mean different possibilities to explore the power of local people. Doing field research in order to develop evidence-based ideas about rural community activity for social infrastructure progress, it disclosed some interesting remarks on it. Community development initiatives should prove the need of essential services. Some scientific works (Cavaye, 2001; Planning..., 2012) revealed that community activity development starts with its members fundamentally considering,

how they imagine the living environment based on social infrastructure in the future. Determination of SI services needs shall be relevant due to the fact that SI services shall serve as the main force directed towards enhancement of community activity, its focus or integration abilities and enabling the satisfaction of both physiological and higher spiritual needs, e.g. expression (personal fulfillment) needs.

In order to know the opinion of local residents about RSI sector, we have compared objective and subjective evaluation results. Evaluation of RSI conditions has shown that scores of subjective RSI sector assessment are higher than scores of the objective one KSI (Table 1).

Gained results has provided us with the opportunity to assume the application of different evaluation methods to subjective and objective evaluation of RSI sector, i.e., only several factors (objects) (selected by the research team members and prioritised by experts) have been subjected to objective evaluation of each RSI sector; moreover, residents of pilot areas have provided their general opinion about these sectors. The subjective evaluation has shown that rural communities have sufficient information about current conditions of social infrastructure at local level and are able to decide on priorities and aspects to be improved at once. It has been determined that lower evaluation of RSI sector (e.g., personal and property protection sector's evaluation is until 3 scores) causes higher attention and requires greater efforts of rural community to be paid in order to improve existing situation.

Research results highlighted particular characteristics of local communities (Fig. 1). It shall be emphasised that communities of pilot areas are described rather positively. Consequently, it could be assumed that rural communities are in progress, prosperous enough with their activity and able to

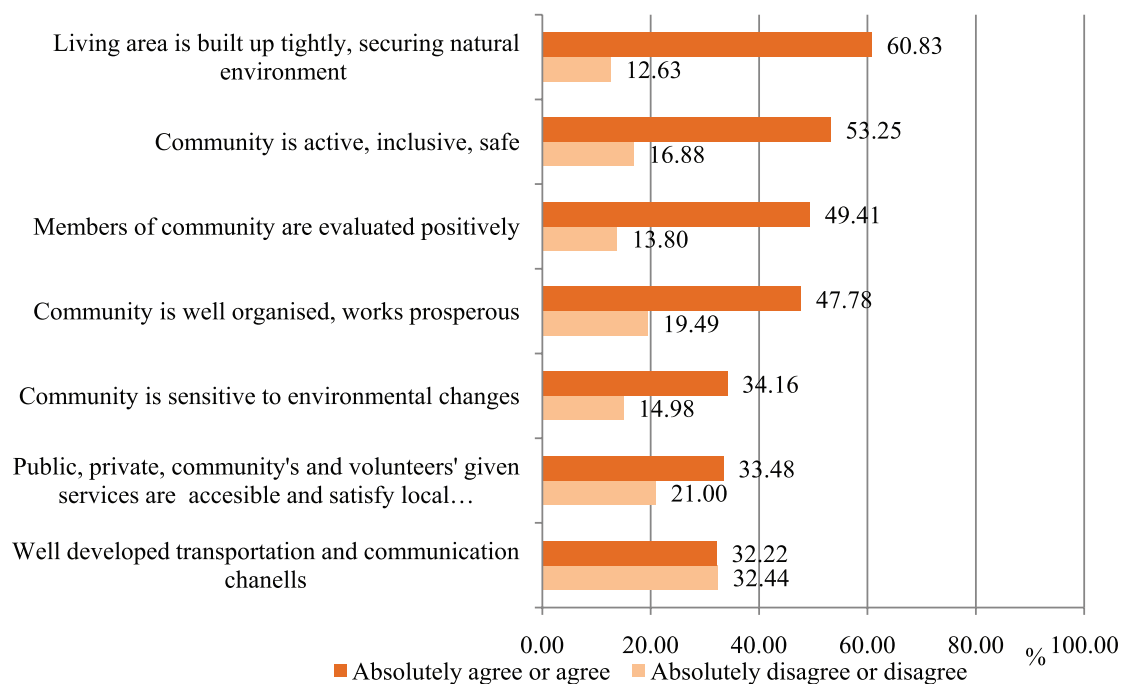


Figure 1. Pilot areas respondents opinion about rural community key features, 2014, percentage.

ensure enhanced wellbeing for existing and future generations. On the other hand, results disclose that different agents from public, private and volunteering sectors still have to put bigger attention and support to local communities' efforts for changes while improving and making attractive living in rural area. The key feature of social infrastructure ensuring communities' viability and activity is transportation and communication channels. Improvement of these elements could help in stimulation of rural

communities for innovations and more active role in society.

Considering social status of respondents, it was revealed that rural community shall pay additional attention to groups of residents that describe themselves as "barely can survive" or "live poorly", because their evaluation of RSI sectors was lower than the evaluation of group of residents that describe themselves as "live well or live very well". The same situation occurred when respondents were asked about

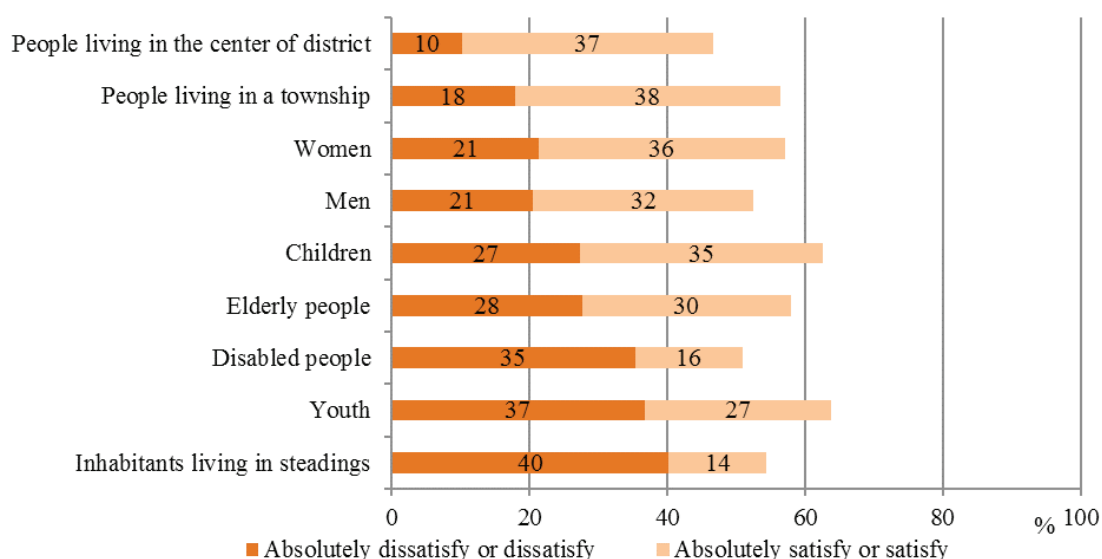


Figure 2. Distribution of pilot areas respondents' opinion about how rural social infrastructure services quality satisfies social groups' needs, 2014, percentage.

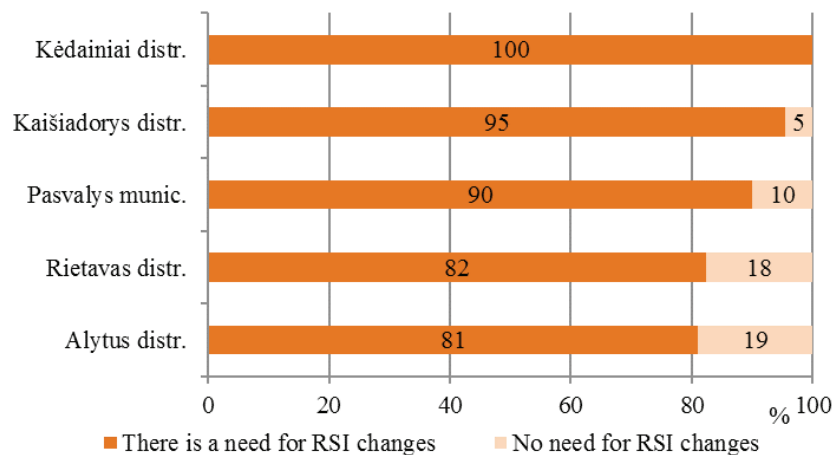


Figure 3. Pilot areas respondents' opinion about the need for rural social infrastructure changes, 2014, percentage.

the compliance of existing rural social infrastructure quality with the need of particular social groups (Fig. 2).

In the Figure it is shown that people living in township and the centre of district evaluate RSI services best, but inhabitants living in steadings and disabled people evaluate them the worst. It means that in order to achieve social infrastructure progress in rural areas, needs of various social groups shall be met, since RSI serves are deemed as an empowerment instrument which enables rural inhabitants' integration into local community.

In the course of research we have determined the attitude of respondents towards rural social infrastructure changes on the whole and in separate sectors (Fig. 3).

Determination of the need of social infrastructure changes could relatively reflect rural inhabitants intentions or willingness for action. Need for innovations varies depending on the social infrastructure sector development level in different pilot areas; however, the major part of respondents said that improved rural social infrastructure promotes normal participation of rural people not only in rural community, but also in society as well as enable rural people to manage different rural development processes related to improvement of personal and social wellbeing.

Summarizing it should be mentioned that research confirmed that by taking a positive approach to community activity, the changes of rural social

infrastructure are possible. In spite of difficulties, rural communities understand the importance of social infrastructure changes in rural areas. As it is stated in the Lithuanian Progress Strategy "Lithuania 2030" (2012), modern communities shall be open-minded for community-based initiatives to become essential representation of rural community needs in all rural development processes.

Conclusions

1. The role of rural community enhancing rural social infrastructure changes can be understood in several ways. Active rural community is like a representer and defender of its members various needs for social infrastructure services. It was found out that depending on pilot areas rural communities' activity different rural agents (local government, public, private and volunteer sectors, etc.) should support local people seeking changes whether to see social progress in rural environment.
2. Rural social infrastructure serves as a social bridge integrating rural people in various activities, promotes participation and collaboration. Accordingly, the research results proved that the need to enhance rural social infrastructure in pilot areas is based on different social group's needs. As well active role of rural community can strengthen both the process building rural human capacity and initiating better living conditions through social infrastructure improvement.

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