

Main Tendencies of the Development of Small Towns

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Small towns play an important role in sustainable development of territories, however insufficient attention to their systematic investigation still is paid in Latvia. Therefore some investigations were done by the Department of Sociology together with specialists from the Faculties of Economics and Information Technologies during 2006 – 2008. The aims of these investigations were to ascertain the main problems of small towns and the way they are solved by local municipalities to provide sustainable development.

Twelve small towns were included into the investigation. There were four selection criteria: 1) they represent various regions; 2) they are located in a different distance from the centre of a region and Riga; 3) the number of population is less than 10000; and 4) they have an experience of positive changes. Investigations were based on the qualitative research method. Sixty semi structural interviews were done with the leaders and specialists of local municipalities and local employers.

The migration of population to the centres of larger regions as well as abroad is a serious problem of small towns not only in Latvia but also in Finland, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Therefore investigations showed objective and subjective fascinating factors applied by local municipalities, as the main factors being the following: maintained possibilities of work, attractive cultural environment, and sense of belonging.

Employment in small towns has a local character and is oriented towards satisfaction of local needs, local market, and consumption. Specialisation of production is necessary due to the limited number of jobs in small towns. But the level is still low. Traditional branches of production as wood production, food production, sewing, and tourism are developing in small towns. Metal processing and production of renewal energy were maintained as non typical branches of production.

Attractive cultural environment is an important fascinating factor not only for local inhabitants but also for inhabitants of surrounding territories. School is an integral part of this environment.

Relations between local inhabitants and the loyalty serve as basis for the sense of belonging. Local as well as emigrated inhabitants get together during a town's festivals and similar entertainments.

Strategies used by local municipalities to develop small towns as production and service centres were also ascertained during the investigations. Two groups of strategies should be mentioned in general: temporising and development oriented. The latter can be divided into traditional and innovative. The majority of small towns apply traditional strategies in their development.

The lack of a uniform definition and typology of small towns hinders investigations. Therefore investigations shall be continued. Such fields as social networks, social capital, social cohesion, and others are interesting for further research.

Key words: small town, strategy of development, fascinating factors, cultural environment.