

SOCIAL INEQUALITIES IN TRANSFORMING RURAL SPACE: STRATEGIES AND BEHAVIOUR OF DIFFERENT SOCIAL ACTORS*

Danka Moravčíková

Katarína Klimentová

**Faculty of Economics and Management
Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra
Slovakia**

(Manuscript 7903 words)

April 2008

Acknowledgments

The author(s) gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra/Slovak Research and Development Agency (APVV), Project No. APVT-20-016602, in realization of a part of rural household survey analyzed in this paper.

* **Mgr. Ing. Danka Moravčíková**, Department of Social Sciences, Faculty of Economics and Management, Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra (www.fem.uniag.sk), Tr. A. Hlinku 2, 949 76 Nitra, Slovakia, e-mail: danka.moravcikova@uniag.sk

Abstract

Concerning globalization, the social reality is characterized by the fact that changing conditions generate a lot of different reactions and adapting mechanisms. Post-socialist countries (including Slovakia) are particularly interesting space for observation of these problems. Countryside and rural communities represent very specific space which is with its traditional basis in the most contrasting “opposition” to modernization processes. Social actors are much more mobile, specific local economies are constructed and attitudes, stereotypes and value systems of individuals, groups or whole communities are changed. The paper is based on the empirical material obtained by quantitative and qualitative survey in selected Slovak rural villages and households from 2001-2006. It points to actual strategies of the rural communities in conditions of the transformation after 1989. In this context strategies and behavior of different types of rural households with the different social position in the stratification system are presented. The paper is particularly focused on the economic practices and strategies, the exploitation of the social networks as well as on the reflection of contemporary development strategies and local government. The attention is aimed at the extent of the surrounding influence and the extent of influence of the former societal experience.

INTRODUCTION

Many contemporary commentators and researches have stressed that we are now living in an era of an important change: a historical moment – a moment of the turn or transition and a radical social change etc. These are the words used and emphasized by many scientists with regard to the social situation at the end of the 20-th century or, in other words, at the turn of the millennium (Long 1993). The new form of social stratification, reasons of social and economic inequalities among people, *winner*s and *loser*s of present transformation processes – these are often discussed topics especially in post-communist countries. These countries found themselves in the confrontation with the principles of market economics, what caused constantly increasing importance of economic capital within the definition of social status of an individual or groups. At the same time, “new” phenomena markedly participate on the development and form of processes of hierarchization and polarization of these societies.

Post-socialistic transformation of Slovak society is a part of long-lasting process of modernization. During these changes, lifestyle and the culture of population is modified which is, on the one hand, caused by the economical, political and social movements in our society, and on the other by winds of integration and globalisation. “There are not many opportunities in social sciences to analyze social systems which have undergone within less than sixty years so many contradictory structural changes accompanied by so much experience of extreme cultural and social conditions like in many post-communist countries. Therefore, the analysis of these metamorphoses and their context, including the reasons and consequences, can serve as a real *laboratory* for the study of the social change.” (Machonin 1997: 80)

SOCIAL INEQUALITIES IN POST-SOCIALIST SLOVAKIA

A new system of social inequalities and stratification was developed in the 90s of 20 century – in general different from the one existing for 40 years in Czechoslovakia. Until recently relatively homogenous Slovak society carries more new differentiated features, e.g. setting up of vast differences in incomes, living level and property at individuals and the whole groups of inhabitants or the development of political – economic elites closed against the rest of society, on the other side the foundation of number of the lowest social class consisting of the people dependent on the state care and charity. The communist society was founded on the egalitarian ideology according to which the wealth lost its legitimacy, the ostentative consumption was denied, the accumulation of economic capital became legal (however, the reality was often different) and the importance of social capital increased (Možný 1991). The social capital could be transformed into economic capital in the form of available contacts and

the social network based on clientelism. The “not legitimized” wealth and poverty lost their social status in the regime of so called real socialism. The right to work and the status of an employed person had universal character and were provided globally. Therefore, the poverty was not approached as a social problem but as an individual or private one or, sometimes, even as the failure of an individual (Mareš 1999).

Taking into consideration the globalization processes, the increasing heterogeneity and differential of present Slovak society increased the danger of its fragmentization, the deepening of social exclusion which is very closely related to the questions of group identity, solidarity as well as to the social dialogue or approaches to the integration (Strapcová 2005). Changes in political and economic situation in the country were manifested at regional level. This is the cause of the historical, cultural and sectarian differences and the differences in living standard and life patterns, too. Differences between socio-demographic and socio-economic behaviour in urban and rural space are eminent in all parts of Slovakia. The above mentioned situation causes an unequal increase of the share of people in lower social classes within regions and the deepening of the differences between “rich” and “poor” regions. Nevertheless, their labour markets, which used to be relatively isolated, are becoming interconnected. The migration of people within the geographical space towards more stable and modern regions provokes the migration within the social space – some people can make use of the opportunity for their personal development, others are threatened by marginalization and other group of people creates their own parallel structures (e.g. within the community). These changes influence all social classes¹, predominantly middle classes which lose their limits and the conflict between their “old” and “new” representatives is more and more evident within their internal structure.

Researches of social structure pointed at several particularities of stratification and differential processes and indicated the following basic trends:

- (i) In the post-communist development in the '90s, the Slovak society was transformed into the “middle class society”. At the same time, the living level, prestige and the social importance of working class decreased and its main part failed into the sub-class. The education and qualification always function as the mobility channel, especially, in connection with the usage of social network, political and other contacts, favour etc. (Sopóci – Džambazovič 2003)

¹ The class understanding of social stratification was also taken into consideration. Therefore, the classes are not approached as real social groups with clearly set limits. This is suitable for the analysis of life strategies and life chances.

- (ii) The middle classes strengthened their status. This process was characterized mainly by the unbalance of socio-cultural and economic dimension. In general, it is supposed that there is a conformity between individual parts individual's status in the society. This condition of consistency is fulfilled mainly by the representatives of upper and lower social strata in Slovak society. There are more cases of inconsistency within the middle social strata.
- (iii) Concerning the existing sociological knowledge, it may be assumed, that the following are the main criteria to distinguish individuals: the individual's position on the job market, the individual's position at work and the individual's position in the hierarchy of its management and the individual's social status. To answer the question whether the collective features of the system of social stratification are determined on the basis of these criteria only by socioeconomic categories of population or whether they are or they become real social groups characterized by the class consciousness and performance is possible only with regard to the findings of empirical researches of social stratification of the society (Sopóci 2000).
- (iv) The system of hierarchy of Slovak households enables to classify households into five classes² in Slovak society. The households of lower socioeconomic status prevailed in Slovakia and there was detected an unstable tendency to the improvement because more households of lower middle class approached the status of middle middle class households and did not fall into the lowest social class. This movement was not considered to be of great importance because it had been known from other sources that low incomes of the households of lower middle class were nearly the same as incomes of the households of the lowest social class which received the social benefits.

COUNTRYSIDE AND TRANSFORMATION: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

As to the Slovak countryside, new trends of social development represented not only considerable structural changes but also new forms of real behaviour of this population group. The process of differentiation was deepened. On one hand, it emphasized the existence of

² Knowledge about the present state of hierarchy of Slovak households was stated by Vašečka (2003). Used classification of socioeconomic status of households was based on the classification of the of the household (a person with the highest income) into the one of the five classes as well as on other variables as the job of the "head" of the household, job position and the highest level of education reached by the "head" of the household. To the upper class belonged 4.1 % of households and 8.9 % to the upper middle class. The middle middle class was represented by 24.5 % of households; 19.2 % of households belonged to the lower middle class and the lowest social class was represented by 43.2 % of households in Slovakia.

social spaces threatened by “the collapse” and, on the other hand, the existence of the strong territorial activating or revitalizing internal potential. A considerable part of rural population presented the attitudes of social degradation and approached the poverty as the result of social injustice. They also manifested feelings of social decline and general scepticism towards political elites. New islands of poverty were formed in the countryside. However, more collective activities were created as well. Their aim was to reactivate the countryside and its shift to other socio-economic level as well as to deal with particular examples on the return of individuals or socio-demographic groups to the countryside (Buchta 2003). Nowadays, 44 % of inhabitants live in the countryside and the rural settlements represent the key unit in the settlement structure³. The following are the social problems which are often presented in rural settlements in the present transformation period: worsening of social climate and relationships among people in the municipality, the rise of criminality and unemployment and problems connected with their solutions, the reduction of cultural and social life, more and more difficult providing of appropriate level of living conditions as well as the deepening of socio-economic differentiation of the municipality, insufficient activation of inhabitants, entrepreneurs, associations or clubs when solving the problems in the municipality, the loss of local identity etc. (Gajdoš 2002; 2007). Rural communities often face difficult situation: on one hand, they are disrupted by the impacts and pressure of globalization and on the other hand, their internal resources are activated and they “start” the new development.

This research of the countryside was based mainly on theoretical studies about local forms of globalization (e.g. Miller 1995) as well as on existing studies of local rural communities which point out the importance of “the heritage from the past”, continuity and similarity with the communist and pre-communist period. According to them, the cultural specifics are dependent on local traditions, values, religion as well as on the goals and strategies of particular societies (e.g. Danglová 2001; 2005; Danglová et al. 2005). Social system includes ordered relationships and mutual dependence among individuals or groups. It is analytically efficient to understand it as “repeated social progress” and, precisely, institutions represent its constitutional and deeply established practise. The logic of these human outputs is based not only on their external functioning but also on the way in which they are reflected (Giddens 1979).

The rural community is not a closed or limited unit. It is a community with the specific quality of interpersonal relationships. The history together with the problems of present social

³ Municipalities up to 1,000 inhabitants represent 68 %, municipalities up to 2,000 inhabitants 87 % and, in total, rural settlements represent 95 % of all settlements in Slovakia.

development (e.g. contradictions or conflicts) influences more deeply the relationships between people living in rural space than those living in urban space. It is evident that the behaviour and decision making of individuals is intentionally or unintentionally limited by powers (spatial, time, economic, social, symbolic) that are independent from them and without their identification, it would not be possible to interpret individual cases. Therefore, the rural community represents a social space which is formed by global, regional or local conditions, processes, phenomena and influences. At the same time, it is singularly and originally constructed in schemes and ways of human perception, thinking, acting and behaviour as well as in social structures. Rural communities also represent an important (though, not the only one) factor of the influence within the formation of the sense of local identity. What happens among people in the village depends not only on the village itself but also on the powers of wider action (Haukanes 2004: 85,86). The possibilities of existing community (e.g. neighbourhood or village) to create contexts and local subjects are influenced by abilities of social formation of wider range to form a locality which would determine the general character of any community in the range of its influence.

Behaviour of people can be very clearly understood on the basis of social exchange theories. Independently from what people “exchange” between each other (tangible properties, services, respect or friendship, words etc.), the question of reciprocity, equivalence of their status, motivation, consensus and values is becoming more and more important. Concerning the influence of classic study of Mauss (1999, orig. 1925), two opposite types of exchange are generally taken into consideration in anthropology – the exchange of products and exchange of gifts. The former is known by its purely economic objective and the latter by its social objective whose economic aspect remains disguised or hidden. According to Bourdieu (1998) it is suggested to distinguish the *economics of symbolic properties* and *economical economics* because the above mentioned bipolarity is not completely unambiguous and there exist certain parallels. “The principle of the economics of symbolic properties is not the calculating subject but the actor who is socially predisposed to enter the exchange game without any intention. The actor who does not admit or is not concerned about the fact that it is an economic exchange in reality.” (Bourdieu 1998: 127). This type of economics is not directly oriented towards the profit. Nevertheless, one of its features is that economic acts are modified into symbolic acts. The social bond is formed and *the symbolic capital* is accumulated. The economical economics is “more economical” because it saves the work with symbolic construction which should objectively disguise the objective truth of action (Bourdieu 1998: 128).

Behaviour and action of different social actors are reflected in the social stratification of local community. They are conditioned by different motivation factors and directed by various objectives together with their consequences or the degree of assessment. At the same time it is possible to distinguish different types of strategies, tactics and practise. Concerning their differentiation in processes of modernization, we often use the dichotomy *traditional – modern* or concepts considering the economic activity to be the tradition, continuity or the innovation. Gudeman (1996) distinguishes the opposites in another way – in models of community and market economics. “In practise, the economics is the combination of both models but their balance changes and the solution is complicated because cyclic reproduction is the act of mutual interactivity. However, the exchange disturbs social bonds and leads to the competition or rivalry. A lot of economic theories are aimed at one or the other end of this context but ethnographic studies indicate combined, complementary and dialectical character of economic practise. They recommend those possibilities where market economics is “*embedded* into the community economics” (Gudeman 1996: 174). The practical experience of some ethnologists dealing with the Slovak rural communities also point to the fact that, in analysis, it is more appropriate to distinguish types of social action by means of the degree of rationality and to use the terms enculturation and acculturation for this type of analysis.

SUBJECT OF THE STUDY AND RESEARCH TOOLS

This case study describes the strategies of different rural communities applied in the period of societal transformation (after 1989) as well as the life strategies, behaviour and activity of people from different social classes living in rural households. They are evaluated in the wider inter-regional comparison. The attention is paid to the degree of influence of the environment to which these strategies are set and to the degree of influence of social experience from the past. The further aim of the study is to characterize the local form of new social stratification system in rural community; to indicate the similarities and differences of “transformation” practise and strategies of rural households representing different social classes and to identify the role of symbolic capital and different social status of social actors within this topic. The study is aimed at the managing of the property and finance, the usage of social network, planned socioeconomic activities as well as at the reflection of developing strategies and the self-government of municipality.

The study is based on the empirical material which was obtained by quantitative and qualitative research carried out in selected Slovak municipalities and households within the years 2001 – 2006. The quantitative part of the research took place in three Slovak regions (districts – level NUTS IV). In every region, there were selected two small municipalities up

to 500 inhabitants, two middle municipalities up to 1,500 inhabitants and two big municipalities with more than 1,500 inhabitants. The data produced by this sampling strategy are not statistically representative of the Slovakia's entire rural population, but the three areas in which questionnaires were administered are socioeconomically diverse and reflect Slovakia's main dimensions of socioeconomic diversity. The overall number of responded households was 656; the overall number of villages was 18. The data were carried out by means of standardized interviews⁴ according to the questionnaire in randomly selected rural households. It preceded the qualitative part of the research which was carried out in two selected municipalities. It consisted of semi-standardized interviews with mayors of municipalities and repeated visits and interviews in selected households whose aim was to collect their "transformation" life stories. The selection of households we questioned in this part of the research was not random. It respected the results of quantitative research and identified models of regional stratification. Individual households represented different social strata within the research. Different character of selected municipalities (regarding to their different "starting transformation capital") makes possible to think about different adaptability and adaptation strategies of communities and points at the importance of the "power" of community in post-communist society. Both selected municipalities belong to small municipalities⁵ and they started to function as self-governing units in the transformation period. One of them used to be a part of the district town and nowadays it has a markedly suburban character. Before the transformation, the second municipality was administratively united with a neighbouring small municipality but they were split after 1989. Both selected municipalities were characterized by certain form of dependence in the past. However, this dependence did not have the same quality. The present socio-demographic, socioeconomic and technical and infrastructure status of municipalities is similar but it can not be said about the latent social potential which was formed in both municipalities in the transformation period.

Repeated visits permitted to compare changes which were presented not only in the physical appearance of selected rural communities but also in the behaviour of people, their reactions, willingness and the degree of interest when talking about their personal, family and

⁴ The average interview took 50 minutes. The interviews usually lasted from 30 minutes to 1 hour (in special cases 75 minutes). It depended on the character of the household we questioned. The interviews were carried out in the afternoon and in the evening from Monday to Saturday.

⁵ According to the criteria applied within the comparative socio-spatial analyses, the municipalities up to 1,000 inhabitants are considered to be small municipalities. One of the municipalities is situated in the upper limit of the size category whereas the second one represents approximately "the half of the first one" with regard to the size.

general problems etc. The first part of the field research took place in 2001-2002. The results of the questionnaire survey were processed and informal interviews with representatives of self-governing municipalities selected for the qualitative research were carried out in 2002 – 2004. The rest of the qualitative research took place in 2005 – 2006. The data were carried out by means of interviews and observation.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Rural Communities in Conditions of Transformation

Transformation period signifies the strong polarization of the rural community which includes the property polarization as well as the social and political polarization. Respondents of the questionnaire survey observed the worst situation in the social participation as well as in inter-personal relations. The survey showed that older people and people living in more traditional environment perceived more sensitively the overall individualization as the result of modernization. The phenomenon of citizenship, in the sense of keeping an eye on people's representatives and their assessment, is related to the rate of modernizing processes within a certain environment. However, the utilitarian goals that are considered to be the reason for suchlike "civilian watching" may not be excluded because the majority of respondents found that the relations connected with the private property were worsened very much.

It is pretty difficult to evaluate community functioning by means of quantitative data. Although the respondents declared the need for the revitalisation of community life, the majority of them would not be able to determine "how to achieve it". To compare existing possibilities for solution, we can use the example of two municipalities who carry out different transformation strategies and tactics. The first municipality demonstrates how the community can function in the post-communist period. This small municipality is situated close to heavily trafficked road and presents combined industrial and agricultural character. There is no private farmer in the municipality. The municipality has maintained the collective farm, though, in a transformed form – it cultivates the land (also from neighbouring municipalities) rented from private proprietors. The majority of managers are influenced by practises of former communist management. The collective farm is flourishing and it represents certain multifunctional institution for the municipality. Apart from solving the local unemployment, the collective farm cooperates with the self-government and supports cultural and sport activities in the municipality. As to the non-agricultural local unemployment, a lot of people were leaving the municipality in order to find a job in industrial enterprises in nearby municipalities during the communism. After 1989, there were a lot of sole traders who have been running their business since then. Although they employ only 3-5 employees,

they give preference to local employment and try to help the municipality by hiring problematic groups of inhabitants (alcoholics and Romanies) for seasonal works. Reciprocally, the municipality tries to solve different orders by assigning them to local entrepreneurs. In comparison with the majority of small municipalities in Slovakia, the unemployment is very low (14 from cca 500 inhabitants). The municipality also finances a kindergarten and contributes to the transport of children attending the primary school in a bigger municipality because there is no a primary school in municipality. There are various associations and neighbourhood groups who organize the community life and regularly motivate the inhabitants.

The second bigger suburban municipality has business and service character. After its separation from the district town, the municipality focused on the promotion of this act and on its symbolic emphasizing (printing of postcards, souvenirs with symbols of municipality, the song about the municipality, cultural events etc.). The above mentioned activities united the local community only at the beginning. Events that were repeated many times every year started to have mostly opposite effect. As to the economic area, the municipality closed down the former collective farm and rented its buildings to several private companies. The land is cultivated partly by the collective farm from neighbouring municipality and part of it is owned by original owners who want to rent it. The majority of people work in the tertiary sector or in industrial enterprises situated in neighbouring towns. Generally accepted principles of internal regulation of local employment do not exist. In the case of hiring people from problematic groups, the municipality applies the system of solidarity only on seniors. There is a pensioners club and several more associations in the municipality. However, they do not try to coordinate their activities. The primary school was closed down because parents preferred to place their children into the primary schools situated in towns.

Rural Households

Regional and Local Forms of Social Stratification

The rural household keeps the status of one of the key institutions in local community. Concerning the above mentioned fact, it is also the basic subject of collective decision making that consists of individual economic representations. These individual economic representations are involved in common living and associate sources according to the demands on satisfying the needs by tangible and intangible property.

The quantitative research of rural households confirmed that the post-communist transformation highlighted the differences between regions of western and eastern part of Slovakia. These differentiations were also presented in different strategies, dreams or future

plans and were “evaluated” in different stratification distribution of households. Economic, socio-demographic and socioeconomic differences between questioned rural households projected into selected indicators of compared status lines were emphasized in different inner hierarchy arrangement of regional samples. The regional stratification models outlined that the classification of households according to the criteria of the economic status (income, household conveniences, the spatial living conditions) does not copy their classification according to the selected indicators of the socio-cultural status (the education level and structure of socioeconomic positions of household members, the population quality). The economic and income differences between household samples from monitored regions ranged from 20 % to 27 % and socio-cultural differences ranged only from 6 % to 10 % (see Figures 1 and 2). Therefore, the process of differentiation of rural households can not be perceived only as the reflection of the varied structure of its members but predominantly as being dependant on the urban, spatial and socioeconomic situation of the region.

The further aim of the quantitative research was the “formation” of particular representative types of rural households for individual social classes in relation to the following qualitative research. We interviewed particular family households in monitored municipalities on the basis of the determination of representative types which represented the hierarchy of rural households.

Profiles of performing social actors

The qualitative part of the research was carried out in characterized rural households. The need for introducing the profiles of social actors in this chapter resulted from their uniqueness. Their stories were one of the sources of information for the interpretation of transformation period in rural environment. Therefore, we should take into consideration that, despite of their “methodologically reasonable” selection, any effort to form common or distinct features in their behaviour and strategies represents a certain simplification.

The lower stratum is represented by a two-generation household that consists of parents in middle productive age (43 and 39 years old) and six children at the age of 18 to 2. Both parents have secondary school education. The husband was unemployed but he has been employed in a private company recently. The wife is on the maternity leaf but she worked “unofficially” in her sister’s company for a short period of time. They used to live with their parents and they have moved to the countryside from smaller town where they lived in the block of flats. They live in a small old family house and they reconstruct it by themselves. The family farm (small garden and livestock) is an inseparable part of their everyday existence. They are very religious and their children are also educated in this way. Although

they have been living in the municipality for eight years, the local inhabitants consider them to be newcomers. Therefore, they keep in touch mainly with other newcomers. This category also involves the three generation household consisting of seven members: retirees, their son and his wife (48 and 42 years old) and three grandchildren at the age of 18 to 12 . They live together in an old family house with a garden. The grandfather has primary education and is the member of municipal board. His wife attended secondary vocational school and her son and daughter-in-law attended apprentice centre. The son commutes to work to neighbouring town where he works in a car repair service. His wife works as a saleswoman in a local private shop. The income of individual household members is very low and the generation gap causes a lot of conflicts because they have different generation approach to the small farm and to the meaning of self-satisfaction. Conflicts arise every day, especially, between the daughter-in-law and mother-in-law.

The middle strata are represented by household of two retirees at the age of 79 and 75 who have been living in the municipality since they were born. Both retirees come from the families of workers, they attended apprentice centre and have close relationship to agriculture. Therefore, a small farm is an inseparable part of their way of life. The husband was a chairman of local self-government in 1983 – 1991. Before that, he had been its member for many years. His wife has been working in a co-operative society *Jednota* all her life. Its local branches were and have been situated in almost every municipality in Slovakia. Their three adult children live in a nearby district town with their families. They are regularly in touch and help each other. Another representative household of this category is represented by two generation household consisting of two members. The first member is a teacher at primary school and a member of municipal board (51 years old). She lives with her son (30 years old) who is a sole trader. She has a very strong emotional attitude to the municipality, her parents' house and to her profession. Therefore, she has high social prestige within local community. She is not divorced but has been living separately from her husband for many years. The son has the completed secondary education. He has been working as a sole trader since he finished the school because he wanted to be financially independent as soon as possible. The father helped him financially when he wanted to set up business.

The upper strata are represented by household including five members: a husband (42 years old) who is a very successful entrepreneur within the region, his wife (35 years old) and three daughters at the age of 17 to 3. Both of them have the completed secondary education, high income and above average standard of living with regard to rural conditions. The wife helps her husband in the company from time to time. Her main task is to take care of children and

household. Their above average living level and successfulness in business are the results of their courage to set up business immediately after 1989, the managerial skills of husband and his positive experience when working in a collective farm as well as of the strong family background of both partners which helped them in the beginning with credits by collateral mortgage of their family houses.

Economic practices and strategies

The majority of questioned households were more pessimistic than optimistic with regard to the possible development of their financial situation. According to the quantitative research, more than 64 % of households did not see any possibility to improve their financial situation over the next five years and only 13 % of them thought that their financial situation would improve a little bit. A lot of respondents could not express their opinion on this development because they had problems to orientate themselves in the wide range of possibilities, opportunities or legislative measures as well as in the development of political situation. Education, the access to information, the measure of adaptability and the degree of development of individual and team activities in municipality were important determinants that directly and proportionally increased the ability to perceive objectively the social reality. The structure of planned socioeconomic activities of the rural household members expressed mainly the higher need for further education or re-qualification. It was often the only possible way in marginal municipalities. In general, the determination to start with business activities was very low. The vision of solving the living situation by moving from the municipality decreased with real possibilities provided by the particular region. Undoubtedly, it also resulted from such factors as the measure of spatial identity or different types of social bonds which determine them.

The qualitative research showed that economic practises and strategies applied in rural environment are determined predominantly by the age or their generational classification, the type of social experience from the past (mainly in the sense of work experience in the period of communism) as well as by the economic support of family and social background. Concerning questioned households with better economic background, the important task was not performed by educational level but by the courage to set up business and by the ability of particular individuals to orientate themselves within the existing legislative and economic situation. The given statement may be illustrated by comparing the professional experience of the men at middle productive age coming from the lower and upper social strata, whose starting position was approximately the same. Both of them worked at collective farms as engineers and after 1989 they started their own business in the same branch – service and

selling of second-hand cars. The first one (48 years old) was not successful as a sole trader because he was not able to gain sufficient turnover and administration, though, he was given an advantage by his friend at the beginning (he had at his disposal place for free). He gave up and waited passively for the same job offer from his friends. Nowadays he has been working for the minimum wage and he often changes the employer. The second man (42 years old) started his business without any advantage, he even asked for credit. He managed to gain sufficient turnover and he continued to be successful in different types of business where the legislative was not completed. Nowadays, he runs wholesale with medicaments and, after successful business period, he is thinking of selling it to multinational company. His aim is to enjoy his money because all his family has been financially ensured for many years.

As it has already been mentioned, the self-supplying activities have an important role in the structure of economic activities of rural inhabitants. Respondents of both households belonging to lower strata demonstrated the traditional model of self-saturation. Small family farms represented great support within the food supplying. At the same time, they caused that all family members did not have leisure time for another activities and they controlled everyday as well as all the year round household activities. The representatives of the oldest generation worked physically very hard at their productive age and they required the continuity and acceptance of their life style from their son and his wife who have been living with them in one household. These requirements caused a lot of conflicts among them. Self-supplying activities in the first described household were considered to be inevitable for living as well. However, they did not ask older children for help, they supported them in their leisure time activities. Both households demonstrated scepticism towards upper strata, but the first household considered their economic situation as the “burden” they have to put up with. The second household considered their economic situation to be the social injustice and they blamed the state for it.

Respondents from the middle strata were tolerant towards different economic strategies of their adult children. Although they emphasized the importance of university education, they respected the fact that their children had chosen different way of adaptation to new conditions – either they moved to the district town and found a job or they became sole traders. In both cases, the parents provided their children with natural support from small family farms or gardens but they did not ask their children to help them regularly. Adult children helped their parents financially or they invested money into the improvement of their parent’s houses. These households present common standard of living; they consider it to be sufficient and they did not declare the need for its improvement or change.

Social Networks and Their Use

Traditional Slovak village was not interconnected only by neighbour, cooperative and other social relationships. There were formed relationships of the dependency between families within the village which were forced by variable forms (fee by husband or godfather choice, common entertainments, etc.). However, the increasing possibility of the mobility and migration globally originates the reduction of the value of locally bounded social relationships and networks. In general, the respondents observed negative changes in relationships with neighbours and the same fact occurred within inter-generation relationships (see Figure 3). The growing intensity of inter-generation confrontations can be the consequence of various lifestyle opinions and attitudes of older generation towards the overall social situation as well as of some confrontations of behavioural models or lifestyle strategies. It is determined by different generation bonds to the place and community and it is manifested in individual feelings and social involvement. Various visions about the fulfilling of individual needs, their awareness, social orientation and educational level are important additional factors, too.

Reciprocal help among relatives, neighbours, and family or more distant social networks is one of elementary characteristics of a traditional Slovak village. Its characteristic feature is reciprocity. In the past, the principle of reciprocity was consequently used in the framework of the same social class by partners of different community position with respect to their property background and social status. Reciprocal help was realized and has been realized in a variety of situations. The structure of subjects which are in the position of help addressees is changed as well. The traditional subjects remain but new subjects supply them depending on possibilities and character of the region (see Figure 4). According to the results of qualitative research, the social help from the state and local self-government was used by respondents mostly as an additional possibility of solving their problems (their attitude remained the same before as well as after 1989). While respondents from middle strata wanted “to prove that they were not dependent on social benefits”, the representatives of lower strata found themselves tightly above the limit to be formally defined as claimants and allowed to ask for social benefits. This situation referred mainly to the national system of social politics. The local self-government (represented by the mayor of municipality) was considered to be a trustworthy institution when providing support for households from lower strata living in small municipalities. The representatives of the oldest generation who belonged to the lower strata and lived in suburban municipalities did not even make an effort to ask local self-government for social benefits. Their attitudes emphasized state and paternalistic system from the period of communism as the only one which was meaningful.

The qualitative research confirmed a high importance of “good family background” for the household representatives of all social strata. It should be emphasized that a good family background is important, especially in lower strata, not only as a provider of financial support but also as a provider of different types of support (e.g. feeling of security etc.). When talking about “life’s ups and downs”, the majority of respondents talked about family problems or achievements in family life. The respondents from upper strata were willing to create social contacts outside the local community. On the other side, the representatives of lower strata were sceptical and they considered it to be pretty risky. The role of neighbourhood as an important social bond was mentioned mainly by household representatives coming from middle stratum or, particularly, from the smaller of monitored municipalities. The rest of respondents confirmed with their answers the findings of quantitative research (considerably weakened neighbourly relations and life individualization in local community). Neighbourly relations were formed on the basis of physical closeness which grouped people into particular groups. In this way, it evoked the feeling of mutual cohesion or solidarity. However, the transformation process introduced into rural community new forms of social relations among people which were formed on the basis of “market mentality” – e.g. collective entrepreneurship, the offer of paid work, contacts with bureaucratic institutions, restitution etc. The above mentioned facts caused that mainly elderly inhabitants living in the suburban municipality regretted that the role of neighbourhood was weakened and, nowadays, it has often been reduced to “the obligatory and random communication on the street”.

Reflection of Developing Activities of Local Government

The positive evaluation slightly prevailed over the negative one when evaluating the influence of local self-government on the life of rural households (see Figure 5). However, the negative influence was perceived more intensively by respondents than the positive influence. Developing programs as well as the possibilities of cumulating and applying different forms of capital within the promotion of community projects or individually realized activities and the existence of functional microregional associations brought to people visions and examples on revitalization. At the same time, they pointed at the possibilities and functions that the local self-government can have and represent. The influence of self-government was evaluated very negatively by respondents coming from rural communities situated in the eastern region of Slovakia (Sabinov). The greater scepticism was conditioned by the general marginal situation of the region and, moreover, by the marginal position of some municipalities within the region. However, it was also the consequence of other factors such

as the scepticism towards the mayor, local representatives and their skills, the lack of social and political contacts of self-government as well as the insufficient technical equipment of local authorities, poorly functioning local community, etc. The representatives of questioned households also declared to what extent they perceived the activity of government and its reforms in the sense of the impacts on living level of their households. The positive influence of government on the living level was expressed by more respondents from the suburbanized region in the area of capital city. For these inhabitants, the “physical” closeness of government meant higher and more detailed awareness about the meaning of its procedures and arrangements obtained not only by official links but also by informal communication channels by means of social contacts. The negative influence of government was expressed mainly by respondents coming from rural communities with the high level of unemployment, social dependence and elderly inhabitants. One of the reasons was also the paternalistic thinking which has been preserved in Slovak society mainly with regard to above mentioned groups of inhabitants.

The quantitative research demonstrated that belonging to particular social stratum influenced significantly the approach to the evaluation of functioning of local self-government. The representatives of lower and middle social strata appreciated mainly those activities of self-government which contributed to the improvement of external appearance and supported cultural life in municipality (e.g. new pavements, reconstruction of cultural centre, social and cultural events etc.). This approach resulted from the image which was characteristic for the local self-government in the communist period. In that time, the self-government functioned only formally; it did not have the right for decision making but, on the other hand, it participated in organizing and financing of social events. In other words, it took over the role of traditional community which was being destroyed by communist society. The representatives of upper social strata presented more pragmatic and critical approach. Although they considered the above mentioned activities as beneficial ones, they evaluated the development of the municipality by means of investments into the infrastructure, investment purposes, the management of collective property etc. It is important to mention that the above mentioned approach was manifested mainly in connection with personal, economic and residential contexts.

CONCLUSIONS

Modernizing and transforming rural society in Slovakia is characterized by increasing plurality of the forms of life arrangements. Therefore, the classes do not always have to be

hierarchically arranged and some representatives of lower stratum can have better life chances than the representative of middle stratum who is “suffering”.

The suburban rural communities are considered as “winners” of social transformation in the Slovak countryside. However, our empirical findings show that small villages in more marginalized position which are less “influenced by contexts” (and, therefore, possibly future stronger communities) can belong to them as well.

Incomes and financial resources of the households, which are provided by formal sector or by the system of social benefits, are often insufficient for satisfying their needs. Therefore, the interactions with non-market individuals and institutions as well as the participation in formal and informal economy and home economics form an important part of socioeconomic behaviour of rural households.

The value of functional groups expands and weakens the relationships originated from the territorial base as well. It is significant that local communities were transformed and survived in new specific forms. Remarkable contemporary changes are predominantly influenced by the renovation of private proprietary relationships, increasing of social and demographic differentiation of rural community, length of housing in locality and by other factors.

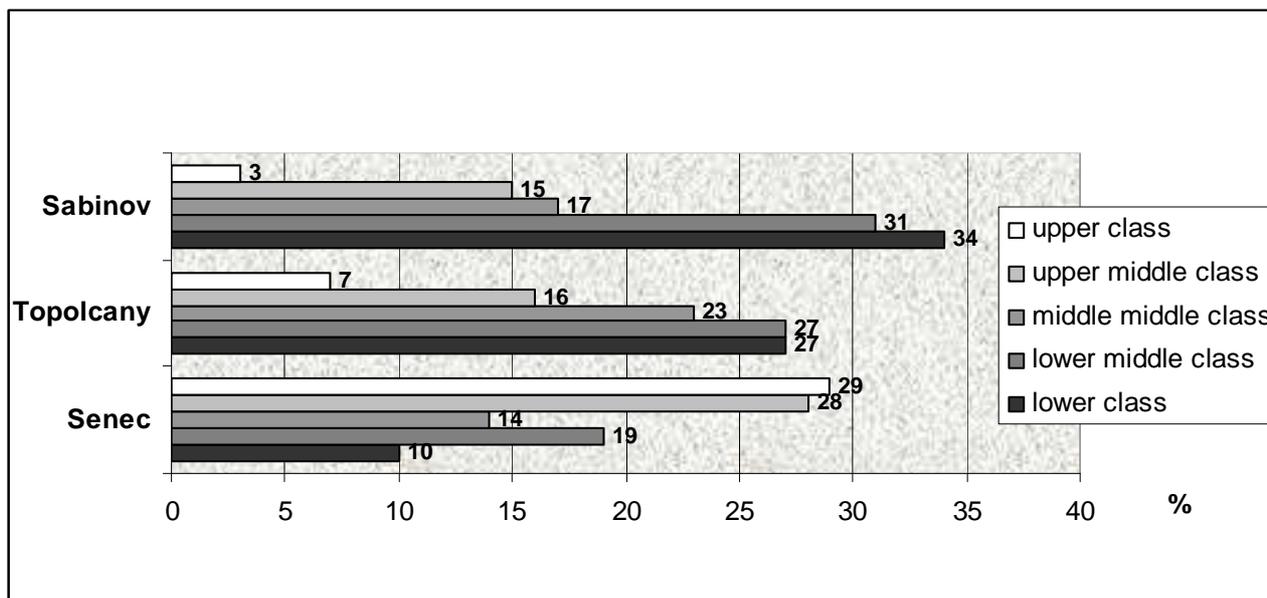
It is not possible to express in details which group of rural households has the highest adaptability because households characterized by more modern economic and civic behaviour lose original demographic and socio-cultural features and vice versa. Concerning the empirical knowledge about the Slovak rural space and population, it seems that the optimal model of “transformation surviving” is the combination of traditional and modern components in the life of rural households and local societies and it is particularly influenced by the localization and the total position of the region.

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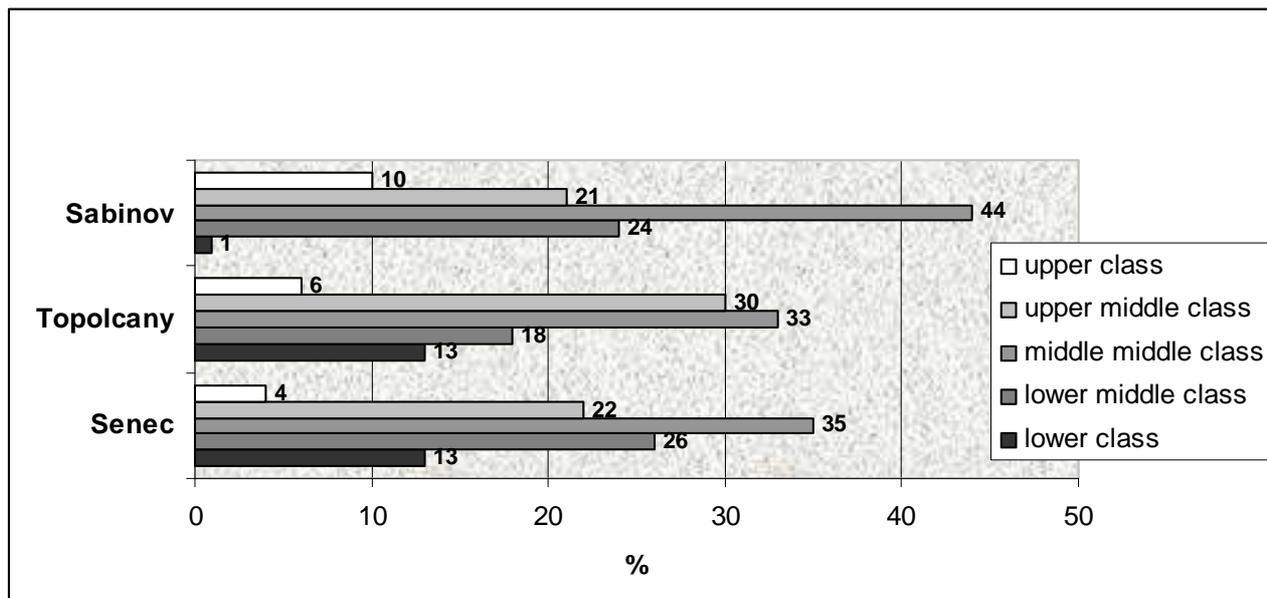
Figure 1: Regional classification of rural households according material status



Source: Rural household survey in Slovakia

Note: Total number of responded households = 656

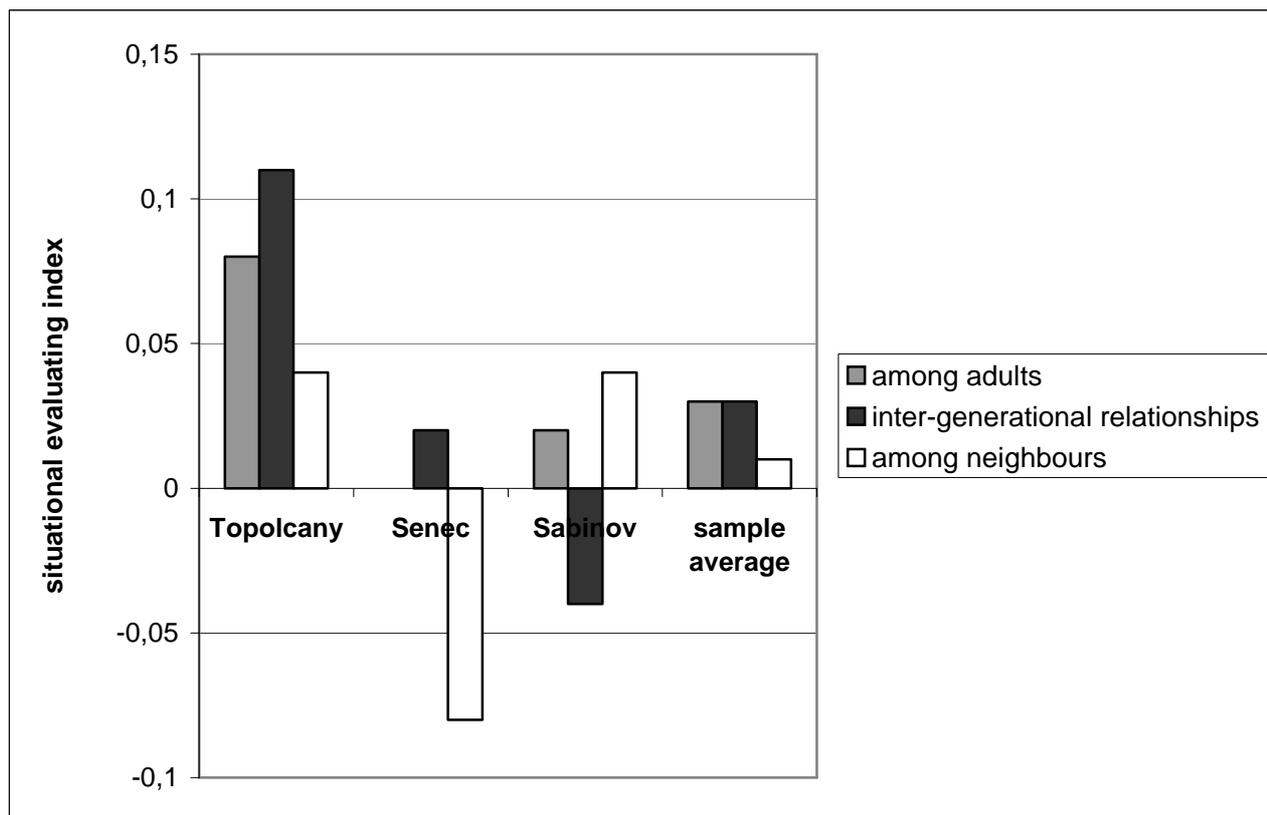
Figure 2: Regional classification of rural households according sociocultural status



Source: Rural household survey in Slovakia

Note: Total number of responded households = 656

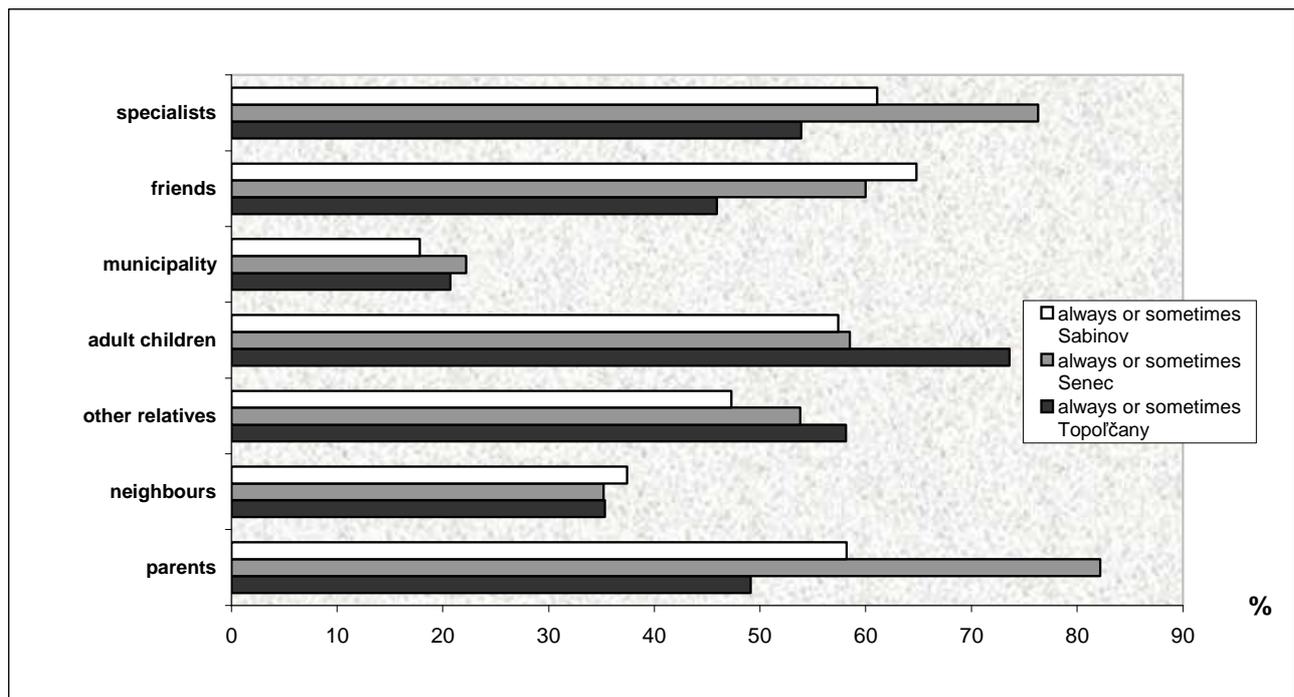
Figure 3: Assessment of relationships changes in comparison to the situation before 1989



Source: Rural household survey in Slovakia

Note: Total number of responded households = 656

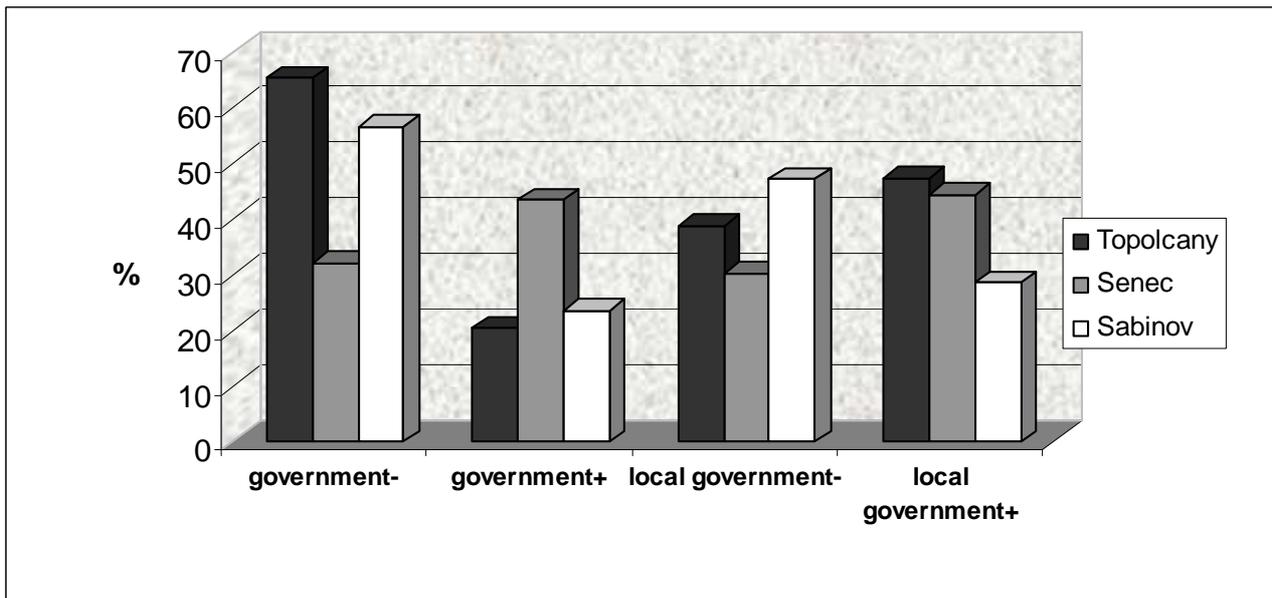
Figure 4: Addressees of “asking for help”



Source: Rural household survey in Slovakia

Note: Total number of responded households = 656

Figure 5: Trust to governmental institutions



Source: Rural household survey in Slovakia

Note: Total number of responded households = 656