

Civil society and its influence on regional development **in rural areas of the Czech Republic**

Blanka Hašová

Czech University of Agriculture Prague

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I. Introduction

Recently, the term „civil society“ obtains constantly on importance. European Union stresses the role of local actors, proclaims the key position of an individual in a democratic and healthy society.¹ Especially for former Central European pre-accession countries this approach presented an extensive field of questions and problems to be solved before they really accessed the EU. Besides to this issue, is civil society, without any doubt, a crucial point for future development itself.

Generally (mostly in the West) the presumption is accepted that in the pre-accession countries civil society in the sense of active local democracy and non-government organisations (NGO's), is not yet always strong enough to be trusted by governments and to become an active partner in rural development programmes.²

But is this presumption really true? How do function non-governmental and non-profit organisations in the pre-accession countries? How do the people participate at public life and which effect have their activities on further development?

II. Purpose of the study

In my article I would like to focus on one of the pre-accession countries, Czech Republic, and present a short thinking about this issue with special regard to development in rural areas. The EU-accession referendum has shown besides to other important questions one very interesting fact. The number of the population of rural areas who participated in the referendum was just three percent less than the amount of people voting in towns.³ In my

¹ For instance see the Declaration of Budapest, Conference COST Action 12, Budapest, April 2002

² <http://www.preparenetwork.org/home.php?page=background>, 7.7.2003

³ According to the public opinion research company SC&C which carried out an research for the Czech television, difference between referendum participants in town and „rural voters“ was on average just three percent. In some place the percentage of voters in the village even outstripped the town – e. g. in Prague voted

opinion, this is one of the signs that the people in rural areas are very intensively connected with public life and show steadily increasing interest in public affairs.⁴ This behaviour is, in my opinion, inseparably connected with the issue of civil society.

Therefore, in this study I will try to give a very brief overview about basic civil movements in my country, while concentrating on social groups which play a significant (let's consider a decisive) role in the democratic social process, namely youth and women. Finally, I would like to outline professional non-governmental organisations in rural areas of the Czech Republic. I will focus not just on the NGO's which are active or important in rural areas but mainly on associations whose activities have a significant impact on development in rural areas.

III. Methodology

Methodology that I used for my analysis insisted mainly on observations and one-to-one interviews inside the organisations and voluntary associations. To be more specific, I decided to choose always one of the mentioned selected social groups movements and show in detail how they work and on which issues they focus. I also tried to analyse how extensive is the impact of their activities on rural development of analysed areas but here I could only concentrate on personal experience, not sufficient statistical sources. For a concrete illustration I have chosen the youth voluntary association INEX-SDA, the women-oriented organisation Czech Women Union and finally the Czech Agrarian Chamber as an umbrella organisation for professional rural NGO's.

Part of the study builds on discussions gained during professional workshops organised by the associations at the national level. Finally, to pose a sufficient overview about rural activities, I focused on literature and sources available on the internet (especially in the last case of agricultural professional NGO's). Thus, the information gained came from national as well as local level analysis.

57.80 per cent of the population, meanwhile in a village in South Bohemia called Křemže the participants percentage reached 63.97. Just for a general illustration, the total turnout was 55.21 per cent - 77.33 per cent voted for the accession, 22.67 per cent against. Compare <http://www.volby.cz/pls/ref2003/re13?xjazyk=EN>, 7.7.2003 and www.radio.cz/cz/clanek/41877, 7.7.2003

⁴ Here I don't want to touch the question whether they were pro- or anti-european but rather whether they had any interest in further development or not which is obvious in the statistical figures.

IV. Phenomenon of civil society

To start a study about civil society, firstly the term should be clearly explained, even though the phenomenon of civil society is not very easy to define. Some scientists regard civil society as „social economy“ or the „third sector“⁵. Regarding the view of Michel Rocard "recently the initiatives of social economy don't have any frontiers. They spread at all continents, all levels, especially at the local level."⁶

So what does the term „civil society“ really mean? It should be a set of institutions and organisations between the state, business sphere and family.⁷ We can involve voluntary organisations, religious groups, public associations but also labor unions, business and professional bodies. Social movements present also a very significant part of civil society. Finally, relations inside family and between relatives are involved as well into the civil society elements.

In my opinion, the most important item is the fact that civil society is considered as an independent sector (next to public and economic spheres)⁸. This is a very significant factor for recent approaches of the EU in connection with the process of enlargement and regional development, as already mentioned.

V. Voluntary associations in the Czech republic

I mentioned already that I should focus on youth, women and professional associations. Even though they are – according to their professional or social orientation, principally very different, they all have many in common. They all try to promote dialogue and cooperation between all actors of rural development, on national as well as regional (and mainly local) level. Through their programmes rural communities should be empowered to participate in decision-making process related to sustainable rural development. They try to pursue full partnership with local populations, nevertheless this point is mostly quite difficult and not very successful. Let me have a closer look at concrete illustrations of civic bodies in the Czech republic.

⁵ For instance Reidar Almas. In detail look at „The Role of Civil Society and the Business Community in Rural Restructuring,“ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/cru/kd01/orange/rocs-00.asp>, 25. 10. 2002

⁶ Rocard, Michel: L'Économie Sociale et Solidaire: Une Perspective Nord-Sud, Revue des études coopératives, mutualistes et associatives, N°282, Vol. 80, Novembre 2001, Paris: IES, 2001, p. 8

⁷ http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/ecs/publications/cswp/cswp5_abstract.htm, 10.12.2002

⁸ Ibid, 10.12.2003

V.I. Youth Associations - INEX – Association for Voluntary Activities

INEX – Association for Voluntary Activities is an NGO whose aim is to develop and support volunteerism, especially by organising voluntary projects (short, middle as well as long term ones). These project include many different activities – beginning with weekend meetings, finishing with one year lasting stays abroad. These activities and its international aspect are enabled by the co-operation with more than two hundred partner organisations world-wide.⁹

The Civil Association INEX-SDA has been organising international voluntary projects since 1991 while running projects in environmental, ecological and social areas. The organisation carries out projects connected with revitalisation of the small country elements, projects focused on both countryside and public green care, renewal projects, planting trees, organic art and leisure activities for local people and children. They organize public meetings and seminars with specialists of the topic of current countryside problems such as the Czech countryside renewal programme, rural lifestyle, traditional rural architecture, traditional folk art, agriculture etc.¹⁰

The association focus on creation of relationships between local people and volunteers. They try to find out which ways of building relationships with rural communities are the most effective and contributive ones, during workshops dedicated to the rural development issues they try to find further inspiration for new rural projects. An important part of the workshops is getting new contacts, creating a social network between volunteers

⁹ INEX-SDA is a member of Alliance of European Voluntary Service Organisation and Co-ordinating Committee of International Voluntary Service at UNESCO (CCIVS).

¹⁰ Look at http://www.inexsda.cz/khorky/index_a.html and http://www.inexsda.cz/khorky/evs_a.html, 9.7.2003; In 2001, Czech republic hosted an international conference called „Accessibility of Voluntary Service – Volunteers in Local Rural and Social Communities.“ During this conference, a big emphasize had been laid to volunteers in local rural and social communities. The participants of the conference who were not just the national volunteers but also their counterparts from partner organisations looked at the issue more from the view of the organisation co-operating with volunteers, which meant recruiting, motivation, rewarding etc. of the volunteers, on the other hand they focused on accessibility of voluntary service. The aim of the conference was not just the regular meeting of partner organisations and their reciprocal exchange of experience, information, inspiration and development of future co-operation, but also a deeper discussion on the topic from both above mentioned views.

who are active in rural areas.¹¹ Organized workshops should also enable the participants to see how rural development can be pursued through effective partnerships and how local people can be actively involved in the development process.

The importance of training or preparation of volunteers, local hosts and local communities is being stressed as well. It is logical that the more local community knows about the project, the more success in the project can be expected. Thus, local authority, local NGO, camplleader, co-ordinating organization and press should cooperate.¹²

To have a concrete idea about how the projects really look like and how they function, in the following part of this study I will present two of them which focus on rural development.

Project Nr. 1 – Rural Centre „The Blue Stone House“

This project takes place at the Rural regional centre of INEX-SDA in Kostelecké horky. Kostelecke Horky is a small village, situated in hilly landscape between two rivers. It lies in a typical countryside region without any bigger near railway station or regular bus service. Even cars are not always available. Nearest town is six km distant.

The association had chosen this place as a base for pilot projects focused on support of the activities within the rural community. Short term and also mid term and long term voluntary workcamps of volunteers from all over the world are held there. One of the main purposes of the project is also to host young volunteers from abroad and show them real problems of Czech countryside. On the other hand, it is also planned as a coordination and motivation centre for young local people who are looking for experience or practise. Finally, the Blue Stone House serves as a national training centre for all volunteers who are prepared for all types of programmes here.¹³

This pilot project Blue Stone House has started in Spring 1999. The organisation promotes sustainable living and low-consumption lifestyle.¹⁴ They have a public library with books stressing countryside renewal. Finally, they set up bio-garden, herb-growing, breeding and got-milk process.¹⁵ As the organization describes „manual work as a main part of rural lifestyle,“ are the volunteers who stay here for short term or long term projects expected to

¹¹ www.inexsda.cz/konference/en/vs_rural_c.php, 9.7.2003

¹² Ibid, 9.7.2003

¹³ http://www.inexsda.cz/khorky/index_a.html, 9.7.2003

¹⁴ http://www.inexsda.cz/khorky/evs_a.html, 9.7.2003

¹⁵ Ibid, 9.7.2003

participate on renovation and development of the garden and the house where they live. There is also work which is recognised as everybody's part of life - household work, cutting wood, keeping the personal garden, heating etc.¹⁶ Volunteers who take an active part in the just mentioned activities, are expected to cook for themselves. Accommodation is in modest and traditional way in an old original village house rent by the organisation. Next to already mentioned activities, volunteers are also expected to help as co-leaders with organizing other short term voluntary service projects, especially environmental, social, renovation work-camps, projects which highlight responsibility care for local historical and natural values. They should establish various programmes for children and last but not least they are expected to participate in programmes and work activities aimed for the organisation itself.¹⁷

Project Nr. 2 - „Meetings in the Countryside“

This programme is based on projects aimed at helping small communities and developing long-term cooperation between and within these communities. It contributes to deepening the associations' communication and cooperation with local people by giving them the chance to express their views about the best way how to solve local problems and how to put these ideas into action with revitalisation and sustainable life in mind. The programme should involve volunteers into the daily life of the community and also present an opportunity for discussion and comparison of ideas, thus „giving experience of country lifestyles whilst working for the benefit of the local community.“¹⁸

Thanks to the kind of work, thanks to art workshops, seminars, trips, excursions and games volunteers might get a better understanding of local problems (social problems, eco-environmental problems and questions of sustainability, self-administration problems etc.) connected with sustainable life style in the countryside and discuss them with local people.¹⁹ On the other hand, the inhabitants of the villages (these projects take place in different villages paralelly) have the opportunity to join camp seminars. This should improve their inner relationship towards the village and the care for it.

The long-term aim is not only to keep up increasing the number of camp seminars in individual regions of the Czech republic but also to maintain the continuity of care and

¹⁶ Ibid, 9.7.2003

¹⁷ In detail look at http://www.inexsda.cz/khorky/evs_a.html, 9.7.2003

¹⁸ www.mar.bg/camps/czech.htm, 7.7.2003

¹⁹ in detail look at *ibid*, 7.7.2003

interest in places where the camps were successful and where the inhabitants joined the camp activities.²⁰

Impact on community life and reactions of the community

It is obvious that the aim of the association and its programmes is to strengthen civil society and to promote local, national as well as multinational exchange in rural development. In my opinion, impact of the voluntary association activities on community life is very significant. If we focus on the two presented projects, it is important to say that both have had an immense increase in voluntary participants recently. Even though a big part of the volunteers does not come from local level, from the „inside-community,“ their activities revitalize the village in a big extent and attract new-comers from other parts of the country for permanent living.

A certain sound of romantic, sentiment and „old-time“ spirit is evident. The question still remains, how far do the young volunteers recognize and really experience the real life in the village. They come just for a relatively short period (maximum of six months), they still know that they have the possibility to return back home to comfort and urban way of life. Nevertheless, the number of young people who are interested in the simple rural way of life still increases.

On the other hand, concerning the contributions for the community itself, the presence of the volunteers might increase self-confidence of „old“ inhabitants, involve them into solutions of problems and bring them new ideas. Especially in the village Kostelecké Horky, the place of the first project, voluntary activities are supported not just by the rather conservative community but even by the strong young generation coming directly from the village (which is not always usual). Young people cooperate very successfully with the volunteers coming from outside the community. In this sense, a real bottom-up approach concerning sustainable way of life and rural community values can present a big hope for a successful survival of rural areas.

²⁰ ibid, 7.7.2003

V.II. Women organisations

Meanwhile the previous youth association operates directly in rural areas with the aim to strengthen and promote sustainable and traditional way of life, the women organisation which is analysed in the following section focus on rural regions from a different point of view – two thirds of their female members live in villages until 2 000 inhabitants-size.²¹ Thus, activities of the Czech Women Union are aimed at this majority of its members.

Nevertheless, their activities have a very different character and way of pursuing than the previous association. First of all, the Union lays a big emphasis on enlightenment and education. They focus on organization of meetings and seminars at local as well as on national level. Here, theoretical papers about the situation of Czech women and their problems are given. The main topics involved are e.g. situation of women and equal rights on the job market, violence against women, women in public sphere or in business, women in non-profit organisations etc. Then, programmes and policies are shaped through discussions, seminars and special workshops where each of the participants from all society-levels can express their views and outline how to solve the most important problems.

Furthermore, the Union provides training and seminars which incorporate consciousness-raising techniques or psychological and gender aspects of self-defense. It has an extensive network of publishing.

Regarding their social-aimed activities, they concentrate on „endangered social groups“ – namely poor families, single-parent families but also very big-sized families, seniors. They also proclaim the equal right for living conditions and equal accessible medical aid (care) for each individual in the society. Thus they act in accordance with recent EU social trends.²²

Another of important activities was the EU-accession referendum campaign. The Czech Woman Union organized many seminars and workshops where the information regarding the positive as well as negative aspects of the access to EU had been spread. TV spots or radio relations had been shaped through intensive discussions among the organization participants' workshops. If we consider the fact that the pre-referendum expectations predicted that it would be the population of rural areas (mainly farmers and seniors) who would vote against the accession but finally the referendum was pro-european, then, in my

²¹ Rural woman – opportunities and perspectives, Czech Women Union, Prague, 2002, p. 3

²² Chržová, Jana: Social politics of EU / Trends, European Round Table on Poverty and Social Exclusion, Aarhus, Danmark, Report for the Czech Women Union Conference in Benešov u Prahy, 29.- 30. 11. 2002, p.2

opinion, activities of this non-governmental organization had played a crucial role for the voters decisions.²³

V.III. Professional Agricultural Associations

At the very end, I would like to outline the functioning of professional agricultural associations.²⁴ Here, I would like to concentrate on Czech Agrarian Chamber (CAC) which is an umbrella organisation which should present territorial and professionally the entrepreneurs from agriculture, food industry and forestry. The organisation started out during the year 1992 when the consensus among different groups of interest was achieved.²⁵

Objective of the organization is to support business activities in agriculture, food industry and forestry, to promote their interests and provide needs of its members. The CAC activities are financed from membership fees and sponsors. The main headquarters is situated in Olomouc (Central Moravia), it has its own office in Prague. It consists of regional chambers representing their members according to the territorial segmentation and the members societies representing their members according to the professional orientation and interests.²⁶

²³ At this place is very important to mention that, as already mentioned, two thirds of total members of the organization come from rural areas – it means that they are most probably connected with farming and agriculture and, on the other hand, that they belong to the older generation. Seniors (people over 60 years) voted by 79 per cent for the accession. See Kroupa, M.: Who surprised during the EU-accession-referendum? at www.radio.cz/cz/clanek/41877, 7.7.2003

²⁴ It is important to say that rural areas in the Czech republic had been connected not just in the era of communism but also a long time after its fall with agriculture. Rural area was almost automatically pre-determined to be an agricultural area. This is the reason why the majority of professional bodies of rural areas is presented by agricultural NGO's.

²⁵ <http://www.agrocr.cz>, 11.7.2003; This was followed by the fact that the Parliament of the Czech Republic accepted the Law N. 301/92 Dig. Which allowed the establishment of the Czech Agrarian Chamber.

²⁶ <http://www.agrocr.cz>, 11.7.2003

VI. Discussion

Finally, before I pass over to conclusions, I would like to count possible questions and topics regarding the rural social development which might this paper open:

- 1) How a project will impact local communities
- 2) How to include local communities in the project
- 3) How to cooperate with local leaders not to be seen as invaders
- 4) The crucial role of training and recruitment process of the volunteers (local as well as non-community participants) for success of the rural project
- 5) How to promote job opportunities for local population

VII. Conclusions

The study has shown that civil society in the sense of active participation in public life, as well as motivation for being actively involved in decision-making process is remarkably strong in rural areas of the Czech Republic. Three concrete civil bodies which has been examined influence in a big extent rural community life, by organizing projects aimed at bottom-up approach inside the community, through education and qualification programmes and finally by promoting interests of agricultural business of rural areas at all levels – national, regional and local.

On one side, there is the endeavour to strengten civil society from the side of voluntary, non-local associations, through creation of strong partnerships at national and local level, through the endeavour to involve local people into rural development decision-making process, through preservation of traditional and sustainable life values. On the other hand, there is the active and positive acceptance of the projects organized by these organisation and active involvement of local actors in this process. Thus, bottom-up approach, decisive for the development of a society in the sense of self-conscious and responsible democratic population can be achieved.

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Contact:

Dr. Blanka Hašová

Czech University of Agriculture Prague

Faculty of Economics and Management

Department of Humanities

hasob@centrum.cz

