
EVALUATION OF CURRENT STATE AND OPTIONS OF DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL MUNICIPALITIES IN URBAN FUNCTIONAL REGION BANSKÁ ŠTIAVNICA

Škvarková J., Slabeciusová B.

Department of Landscape Ecology, Faculty of Natural Sciences, Comenius University in Bratislava, 842 15 Bratislava 4, Mlynská dolina, Pavilion B2, Slovak Republic

E-mail: skvarkova@fns.uniba.sk , slabeciusova@fns.uniba.sk

ABSTRACT

This article reflects partial results of the research, which was carried out by the method of guided interviews with the mayors of rural municipalities and at the same time verified by field research. The guided interviews were made from July to September 2013 in all rural villages of functional urban region Banská Štiavnica (FUR BŠ), situated in Central Slovakia. The main objective of this article was to evaluate present situation of rural villages in the area of FUR BŠ using the list of strengths and weaknesses (LSW), sorted according to absolute number of answers in guided interviews, with proposed solutions of development. From the transcription of guided interviews, in which the questions were focused on expectations in terms of development, description of the advantages and disadvantages of housing, micro-regional cooperation, development options, major limitations, most progressive areas, problem areas, the LSW was created. The LSW and all gained information will be used for our further research. It is believed that only development at the municipal level can ensure sustainability of the whole region.

Key words: sustainable development, quality of life, region, rural municipality, guided interview

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INTRODUCTION

Nowadays the issue of sustainable development and quality of life increasingly resonates in our society. In this context, the popular term "sustainable" is often mentioned as an appropriate solution of the welfare of citizens and the protection and conservation of ecosystems at the same time. Considering the impending economic, social, cultural and environmental issues as the impacts of globalization, we observe trends towards localization and self-sufficient society. Decentralization and creation of regional governments are the issues at the political level; management gets closer to the citizens. At the non-governmental level we talk about different organizations and foundations working in regions, or quite informal communities, often seeking a close contact with nature, practising traditional values and trying to maximize self-sufficiency, using the permaculture farming and non-monetary exchange. At the more official level the importance of regions is evidently growing - traditions and specifics of the region are being highlighted, the identity is being secured, the genius loci is being searched, trans border regions are being formed. More emphasis is put on the historical and natural conditions of the region than on the artificial administrative boundaries. Present experience in application of the concept of sustainable development has shown that the weakness of the concept is in its application on the specific conditions of the regions. Sustainable development objectives, development of background should be based on ensuring the protection of the core of area and the creation of appropriate conditions for its operation. The development of human settlements in regions should provide the basic functions and quality of life for residents while protecting the natural environment, cultural values. It must be based on economic, technical, legal and political contexts (Ira, 1998).

For the listed reasons we have chosen the spatial unit for our research, which is the functional urban region Banská Štiavnica. Functional urban region (FUR) was allocated by Bezák (1990) in his studies on the basis of concept of daily urban systems. This makes these regions more suitable units for research than administrative units. The administrative units often do not reflect functional relations of area in Slovakia (Novotny, 2010). The city is considered to be the core of region, after which FUR is named, in this case Banská Štiavnica. All other municipalities create the facilities of the region, namely 14 rural municipalities: Banská Belá, Banský Studenec, Baďan, Beluj, Dekýš, Ilija, Kozelník, Močiar, Podhorie, Počúvadlo, Prenčov, Svätý Anton, Štiavnické Bane, Vysoká.

The focus of this study is on the evaluation of the current stage of development options in rural municipalities of the region with the proposal of possible actions.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Considerations towards the regional development and improvement of the quality of life in rural municipalities led us to analyze the prerequisites for sustainable development based on the evaluation of the current state and situation in which the municipalities are. The aim was to obtain information about the current status and perspectives in the region, as well as in each rural village on its territory in relation to the possible application of the concept of sustainable development and sustainable improvement of life quality of its inhabitants. For the purposes of our research, we have chosen a guided interview method. Respondents were the mayors of rural municipalities. The mayors are able to discuss the state of municipality and its development objectively. However, subjective viewpoints of the inhabitants of the municipality will be included. In these types of research studies, according to Ira, Huba (2000), it is more important to identify reflection of reality from the respondents' points of view, their attitudes, insights, and suggestions than to study hard data or statistics. There are many studies which are interdisciplinary focused and examine the quality of life, environmental quality and quality of environmental awareness, assessing environmental conditions (Ira and Huba 2000, Ira and Andráško 2007, Chrenščová 2011). An interrogative method is the most frequently used method in this type of study. Data are obtained

through prepared questions (guided interview) or in a written form via a questionnaire (Chrenščová, 2011). An interview is one of the most challenging and at the same time the most popular tool of qualitative research (Denzin, Lincoln 1994). A guided interview is a structured interview, based on a standardized structure, prepared and well formulated questions, asked the entire group of respondents. In this type of conversation open and closed questions may occur. Often it relies on a questionnaire or record sheet. The template is the disadvantage of the interview; on the other hand an easy processing ability is its advantage (Chrenščová, 2011). A guided interview is often used as a form of an expert interview, where the questioned person is being considered to be an expert in a specific field. Evaluation of the interview consists of several steps. After the end of the interview, a transcript of the relevant parts is made. In the case of a structured interview, we have quantified the data and subjected them to statistical analysis. Consequently, we used phenomenon-graphical approach, which consists of analyses of responses, their interpretation and subsequent searching and creating of specific system, hierarchy and categorization of the obtained set of knowledge and ideas (Prokša et al. 2008). From the gained information we have compiled the LSW and proposed actions that improve quality of life and ensure the development of rural municipalities in the examined region. The mayors were asked several questions about development opportunities and threats, housing issues, job opportunities, cooperation in regions and possible activities which can be of any help to them.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The guided interviews were made from July to September 2013 in all rural villages of functional urban region Banská Štiavnica (FUR BŠ). The target group was created by mayors of these municipalities, because as government leaders they are experts on particular issues and they are a major determinant in the development of village, actively participating in events, public affairs. They have both theoretical and practical experience in the field of regional development. FUR BŠ has an area of 292.3 km² and a population of 16,580 inhabitants (2011). Banská Štiavnica is the core city, where the number of 10,387 people lives. Rural villages, which form the background of region, have a population of 6,193 inhabitants. Almost the entire area of FUR BŠ coincides with Protected landscape area Štiavnické vrchy.



Figure 1 Localization of FUNCTIONAL URBAN REGION BŠ in the Slovak Republic

From the transcription of the guided interviews, where the questions were focused on expectations in terms of development, on characterization of the advantages and disadvantages of housing, micro-regional cooperation, development options, major limitations, areas in which the most progress was made, problem areas, we have created the following LSW aimed primary at the rural communities in the examined territory.

Table 1 List of strengths and weaknesses

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
Attractive rural environment Clean environment with relatively good quality of life Active government and community organizations in municipalities Good micro regional cooperation Folk traditions Preserved folk architecture Historical, technical and cultural monuments (some of them listed as UNESCO heritage) Dynamic development, mostly in municipalities on the major transport routes Implementation of projects for revitalization of local environment, reconstruction of public buildings and creation of places for social life and sport uses	Lack of job opportunities Lack of financial resources from shared tax system Drinking water problems, lack of sewage treatment and sanitation Poor availability during winter Passivity of inhabitants and people's apathy towards public issues The aging population Migration of young people looking for a job outside the region Decline in agriculture Small or no use of renewable resources Low tourist services offer Negative impact of previous mining activities Creation of illegal dumps

All the mayors are predicting the development of their municipalities and the entire region as well. Two mayors (Vysoká, Podhorie) think that development will be possible only with sufficient amount of funds mainly from shared taxes; otherwise stagnation followed by decline will occur. Location with good and clean environment is considered to be the biggest advantage of living in rural environment. The mayors of Sv. Anton, Prenčov, Kozelník and Banská Belá positively assess also the location of the villages near the 1st class roads, which is directly connected to highway R1 direction Banská Bystrica - Bratislava and R3 Zvolen – Šahy. The majority of mayors emphasize the quality of housing whereas the mayors of Prenčov and Štiavnické Bane the dynamic development in their municipalities. The high unemployment rate is considered to be the most serious problem by all the mayors. In the area of FUR BŠ the unemployment rate was at the level of 18.46% to the date of 31. 12. 2012 (ÚPSVaR). We can divide the municipalities according to unemployment rate into three groups: 15 – 19.99% Štiavnické Bane, Počúvadlo, Prenčov; 20 – 24.99% Prenčov, Sv. Anton, B. Studenec, B. Belá, Podhorie; 25% and more Močiar, Kozelník, Ilija, Vysoká, Dekýš, Baďan. The mayor of the village of Kozelník sees the unemployment as the positive fact – as there is a wider choice of human resources for jobs in his municipality. This village has a specific position, as the mayor was elected in additional elections at the beginning of the year 2013 and according to her words she started to work as a mayor, when this village was in bad condition, nothing was working, government went to inertia and she had to redevelop elementary functions and general operations. The creation of jobs and favorable business environment seems to be one of the most important measures. The greatest possibilities can be found in the areas of tourism and agriculture. It would be optimal to connect these areas through agrotourism, ecotourism and common, inter-municipal activities aimed at traditional events and festivals. Every village has its specifics, which could be used in presentation and creation of tourist products. In the area of the whole region there are natural, cultural, technical and historical values. Thanks to them the region of Banská Štiavnica is well known not just in Slovakia, but also abroad. At present these areas are supported by various activities of Združenie obcí Zlatá cesta, which is located in the village of Prenčov. All villages of FUR BŠ, except of Banská Belá, participate in these activities; they also cooperate with their neighbours. In the examined area the inter-communal cooperation is at a very high level, ongoing meetings can be found here, as well as shared projects and information flows. All the activities are under the patronage of Microregional association Južné Sitno, which represents a good example of cooperation. The village of Prenčov is another positive

example; it won the second place in the Slovak competition Dedina roka (The village of the year) in 2011. In agriculture there is an opportunity in biomass production as well as in non-conventional plants such as *Cannabis sativa*, which can be grown also in contaminated soils with residues after mining activities and can be used for technical purposes. The village of Štiavnické Bane successfully incorporates sustainable development into the environmental dimension. The presence of Protected landscape area Štiavnické vrchy brings benefits to the village and it also creates a typical brand here. The elementary school and kindergarten of Maximilian Hell, located in the village, is the only one in the world, where children are taught the subjects Falconry, Hunting and Forestry. The school is oriented towards forestry education, positive understanding of nature and also towards tourism education taught in the subject Geography of tourism. The greatest possibilities of the development can be found in these areas – creation of new jobs, development of rural tourism, cooperation with small companies, activation of volunteers and optimization in use of human sources, building of infrastructure and superstructure, development of agriculture, biomass production, composter zones, support of local sale, improvement of cooperation between municipalities, cultivation of negative mining impacts (wind mill parks, solar panel fields, products of tourism). A return to traditional crafts is one of the possible solutions for the development of municipalities. Considering the age structure of the population, another solution can be the creation of social programs with a possibility of building senior centers as it can be found in the village of Prenčov. It is important to support public housing to promote remigration of young families with children, which would have a positive impact on the overall development of rural communities.

The mayors also stated the following list of development obstacles and threats – unfair redistribution of shared taxes, lack of financial resources for development programs and projects, old, passive, non-initiative inhabitants, unused human resources, ongoing economic crisis, weak support for small and medium sized businesses, presence of Protected landscape area, incomplete infrastructure, low quality of roads, decline in agriculture and poor subsidy policy.

CONCLUSIONS

Sustainable development and increasing life quality in rural municipalities is the main goal of development strategies. Only development at the municipal level can ensure sustainability of the whole region. This article reflects partial results of the research, which was done by the method of guided interviews with the mayors of rural municipalities and at the same time it was verified by field research. The guided interviews were performed with all the mayors. For that reason we consider the evaluation of present status of FUR BŠ as highly objective. In the villages many revitalization projects focused on reconstruction of public buildings, cultural facilities, local roads and pavements, building of children multifunctional playgrounds were implemented. All mayors are predicting candidacy in the elections in 2014, too, so the continuity of their work could be kept and they could continue in the projects which are being implemented. The main objective of this article was to evaluate present situation of rural villages in the area of FUR BŠ using the LSW. We gave also proposals how the development issues can be solved. In conclusion we can say that we have managed to fulfill the stated objectives using the selected methodology and gained information will be used in further research.

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