

Article

Which Stakeholders' Sector Matters in Rural Development? That Is the Problem

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Abstract: In the age of COVID, the regaining of economies appears mostly imperative, and rural areas could play a crucial role in this framework. The question of inhabitants' dispersion and low density, and the exodus of rural people to bigger urban centers have determined an adverse effect on rural development. Rural isolation rises to be a higher order good, delivering a higher degree of security in the pandemic context for those seeking refuge from gatherings of cities. Rural areas provide food, natural environments, and resources that help occupations, development, and wealth trends and preserve cultural heritage. Consequently, rural spaces are vital for several motives and thus it is essential to focus on issue of rural development, especially since lacking rural development does not allow dialoging about development in a regional and/or national perspective. This paper investigates the stakeholders' impact on rural development, by considering the increasing role of stakeholders as well as the specificity of the diverse objectives pursued by these groups. As there are several stakeholder groups, attention was sweeping, defining them in a sectoral way to corporate, sciences, public administrations, and society. Where there was a need to distinguish among these sectors groups of stakeholders in a more detailed way, such identification took place, for example, in relation to social leaders. The analysis of the results of the questionnaire survey performed in 2020 aimed to accomplish the identified purposes of the paper. The online survey using the CAWI method was conducted in southeastern Poland among people representing all stakeholder groups. The outcomes of the investigation indicate the great prominence of business in the development of rural areas being able to generate added value and influence the increase of entity potential.

Keywords: rural development; rural entrepreneurship; stakeholders; Poland



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1. Introduction

Rural areas, from European perspective, but especially from the Polish one, have been for a long time characterized by high fragmentation and this situation still remains in many regions after the accession to the EU [1]. This is due to rural households' engagement in agricultural production for their own use, with lower external sales purposes, which is affected by decreasing prices offered to small producers. Another distinctive feature characterizing especially Polish countryside is negative migration, which only negatively affected the level of agricultural production of small farms. In addition, it is possible to notice a gradual change in the usefulness of these areas, which are transformed from the formula of agricultural producers to the formula of agro-tourism, regions providing recreational services. This is facilitated by the advancing (digital) technology, which allows for contact with the outside world through wireless internet connections, but also by sanitary facilities guaranteeing appropriate living standards for the visitors. The development of road infrastructure in rural areas allows for easier access to food and industrial supplies [2]. The specificity of Polish rural situation is surely stronger in terms of fragmentation than this in Europe; however, from the context of negative migration effects

this may be described as similar. Added to this, the problem of ageing populations there remains and even grows, which exacerbates the need to look intently into European rural areas. The changes affecting European rural areas are to a further extent of a demographic nature, namely a dynamically decreasing population of people in these areas due to the migration to cities and overall decrease in fertility [3].

From the economic growth perspective, all country territories need developmental initiatives and this should not be distinctively referred to big cities. Rural areas should be under strong attention taking into account their contribution to the development in the national context [4]. While discussions about poorer developing countries growing rural perspectives, the strategy of entrepreneurial engagement is undertaken and discussed [5]. The importance of entrepreneurship in rural development is even more important in the countries that are at a stage of strong development or developing; however, there is a current need to find out how this refers to more developed countries, especially in the context of the importance of the human factor and especially the issues of entrepreneurial attitudes.

At the same time, it is difficult to discuss entrepreneurship in relation to rural areas given the current negative situation that relates to human capital and social capital in these areas [6,7]. As evidenced by some authors [8], access to tertiary education and innovation can help reaching rural competitiveness and knowledge creation. Unfavorable rural situation may be described, among others, by such factors as [9]:

- Lack of critical economic mass;
- Geographical isolation and remoteness;
- Small number of economic support organizations in the area;
- Lack of financial capital; Hhigher cost of bringing in business;
- Less skilled workforce;
- General lack of social capital, including contacts and relationships that influence entrepreneurship.

The barriers identified above that have a negative impact on the development of rural regions represent both tangible and intangible resources (e.g., social capital). On the other hand, Lichtenstein and Lyons [10] considered the following three basic barriers to rural development: small area and low density of rural communities, socio-economic structure/composition, and internal and external linkages. Regarding the socio-economic concept or socio-economic arrangement, among other things, it should also be referred to the relationships that occur between business stakeholders and social stakeholders. Therefore, taking into account the influence of entrepreneurship as a factor related to people on rural development not only in developing countries, but also in EU countries, an additional interesting factor to analyze will be the question of the type of entrepreneurship as entrepreneurial attitudes can have a more social or more economic direction, depending on the stakeholder groups. The sectors recognized as active are related to SMEs and to social economy sector; however, the first is here prioritized in the analysis. Indeed, the activities recognized as development drivers are those referring the setting up and developing of small businesses. Preferably the development of small businesses with the orientation of the utilization of local sources. Since there may be discussion results taken into consideration as the additional material, the rural leaders consider the promotion of local products and local companies as the key factor in the development of rural areas.

Starting from the background that highlights the crucial role of rural areas because they contribute to the development in the national context [4] and on the other hand the role of entrepreneurship in rural development of countries that are at a stage of strong development or developing, the paper draws its motivations. The aim of this paper is to determine the stakeholders' sector that has the greatest influence on the development of rural regions in a sustainable way. To our knowledge, our study is among the few that focus on investigating the kind of stakeholder affecting the rural development. To be able to fulfill the purpose of the paper, the following research questions were formulated: (1) which stakeholders' sector is recognized as active in rural areas? (2) What kind of activities

in rural areas drives their development? (3) Which sector has the greatest influence on the development of rural regions? (4) What are the barriers to rural development?

Finally, the paper aims to fill the knowledge gap regarding current opinions and existing literature [6,7,9] on development issues in rural areas in the context of stakeholders and with relation to the poor and more developed or developing countries such as Poland. Indeed, the just mentioned literature does not refer to this specific context thus creating a research gap to be filled. The work is structured into 4 sections: the first one explores rural development problems and its causes; the second section describes the methodology; then, results and discussions are drawn; conclusions close the paper highlighting recommendations and policy implications.

2. Literature Review

One of the main perspectives for identifying rural development problems is the human factor, which refers to such characteristics as leadership [10] and depopulation. Leadership here refers to the autonomy of decision-making by rural residents. In addition, in the context of rural areas, it also refers to social leadership, which, when exercised inappropriately, constitutes, in addition to geographic and infrastructural isolation and low economic diversification, a factor that is recognized as acting anti-entrepreneurially [11]. Social leadership can directly refer to public authority, but it can also refer, especially in the context of governance autonomy, to individual residents—community leaders. Residents are usually the object of various actions taken by the authorities at national, regional, or local levels. However, they do not have sufficient autonomy to manage the rural resources they deal with every day. Inhabitants can have a thorough knowledge of their region, which predestines them to actively participate in cooperation and co-determination of the directions of development of the region in which they live. However, not every citizen has enough charisma for leadership and not everyone can therefore act as a leader [12].

Another factor which refers to people and which contributes to developmental problems as well as affects the decline of intellectual capital in rural areas is migration, producing an exodus of young people from the countryside to more urbanized areas [13]. This results in a shrinking and dispersed population, away from customers and suppliers [13]. In addition to the mere outflow of the migratory type to cities, emigration can also be distinguished, i.e., the outflow of people, especially young people to other countries. The greater the development prospects in urban areas for rural migrants, the greater the impoverishment in terms of intellectual capital in the countryside. Thus, the migration of young, educated people will be particularly severe [13,14]. In turn, the impact of young, educated people on rural development is related to the effects of entrepreneurial attitudes, which, among other things, are due to the potential they possess and acquire. There are competencies associated with it, the use of which reward and generate higher incomes, which in turn can feed other budgets by spending precisely in rural areas. Thus, the losses appear to be more severe. Although the nationwide impoverishment in the context of human capital and social capital is noticeable, it is impossible to see the variation in the scale of the problem given the regional variation.

Among the human factors that can be regarded as determinants of rural development differentiation in Poland, the tradition may be indicated and related behaviors of rural inhabitants, as well as individual and also differentiated investment plans of landowners [15]. The activities establish the personal characteristics of the inhabitants that show how human attitudes and decisions can positively influence the rural development and in fact how much depends on the possibility of self-determination. Institutionalization is done by the people and for the people and creates the development framework as well as determines the directions in which public funds are spent a factor that can be classified as relating to people (although its attribute is definitely institutionalization), is the creation of an appropriate strategy for entrepreneurship development in rural areas [16]. In determining the directions for engaging financial resources, both the reference to the human factor, as

an executive force, is taken into account, as well as the indication of the location of the activities undertaken, taking into account the geographical seclusion of rural areas [16].

Territorial seclusion is another of the perspectives for identifying development problems in rural areas. Despite the digital technological boom that determined globalization, it seems to have had a much greater impact on the dynamization of development in urbanized areas than in peripheral areas, mainly rural areas. Observations of changes taking place in rural areas in Poland show that streamlining and innovation have helped in coping with the daily activities of the inhabitants, but not as much as it has influenced the development of entrepreneurship. Therefore, it seems reasonable to answer the question to what extent rural areas are influenced by the development of infrastructure. Geographical isolation, which can be attempted to be compensated for by technological development as well as infrastructural development, has different characteristics in the national context, where there are rural areas with greater and lesser isolation. On the other hand, the factor whose specificity can be characterized as related to human beings and geography is social differentiation. Factors relating to people, geography, and economic diversification create difficulties for rural development. To date, various measures have been taken by authorities at local, regional, national, and international levels, including the European Union, to address these challenges. Geographical seclusion classified as a factor negatively influencing the development of rural regions may be an advantage if we take into account the need to seek peace from the hustle and bustle of big cities. Therefore, from the point of view of tourism, exactly the level of peripherality may influence the level of attractiveness. One of the main worldwide manifestations of entrepreneurship in rural areas has become agritourism [17].

The phenomenon of agritourism lies precisely in geographical seclusion and in level of peripheralization, which determines the level of feeling of greater respite from the hustle and bustle of big cities, but also the ease of access to the outside world, which provides the Internet, and the level of living comfort, factors closely related to globalization and digital technological development. The determinants of tourist attractiveness of a given region are tourist values, which can be defined as a derivative of tourist goods. Tourist assets may include recreational values, sightseeing values, and specialized values.

On one hand, the more interesting the place of retreat and relaxation, the greater its tourist attractiveness, but on the other hand, the greater the likelihood of tourist congestion. In some very popular tourist locations, the growing aversion to tourists is noticeable. Examples of such places include Amsterdam and Barcelona. For the residents of these cities, the value of a quiet life away from the hustle and bustle of tourism is becoming increasingly important. This is why the term detracting tourism has even been coined as the opposite of attracting tourism, which means actions aimed at discouraging visitors.

In the context of development perspectives concerning rural areas, which naturally direct this development towards tourism, there are different directions of human interests regarding the issue of development of peripheral areas. From the point of view of tourism development in rural areas, it is possible to distinguish such stakeholder groups as [18]: tourists, tourism service providers, and other local inhabitants. Each of the mentioned groups is characterized by different expectations, which can be described as not correlating with each other. The expectations of tourists are focused on receiving the highest possible level of satisfaction of needs, in addition at the lowest possible price. Service providers are interested in receiving the highest profit for providing the service, and in addition, not to cause extraordinary consumption of resources used in the process of service provision. Other residents of the region, as they are not directly involved in the provision of the service, may generally be interested in both the delivery and receipt of the service. However, it should be kept in mind that any form of entrepreneurial activity in non-urbanized, rural areas entails the possibility of increasing human capital, as well as social capital [18]. This is related, among other things, to the issue of a diverse and wide set of factors that make up the offer of the tourist product, such as the quality of accommodation, the environment

which consists of resources owned by neighbors, residents of neighboring farms, which make up the territorial unit in which the service is provided.

Communities and Entrepreneurship

Communities constitute a key resource considering local development and can be categorized into those with a higher level of entrepreneurial potential (high-entrepreneurial) and those with a much lower level of entrepreneurial (low-entrepreneurial) communities [19]. The characteristics of a community whose main descriptor is entrepreneurship may also indicate the level of entrepreneurial culture of the community, which is, among other things, determined by the number of entrepreneurial people, or the number of entrepreneurial initiatives, as a measurable result of the activity of entrepreneurial people. The number of entrepreneurial initiatives as a measurable result of entrepreneurship and activity in a given territory can also be referred to the total population of a given area and a similar indicator can indicate the level of social entrepreneurship in a given community. The division of stakeholders, which are the inhabitants of rural areas themselves into those with higher and those with lower level of entrepreneurship concerns the inhabitants and may be one of the factors describing social diversity. It is confirmed in the literature, where entrepreneurial attitudes, characterized by an active person ready to take risks in order to benefit from perceived opportunities is, according to some researchers, deeply rooted in that person's social environment [20]. This environment, in turn, can be characterized by a network of interpersonal relationships and behaviors of specific communities and their cultures. There is a culture of creativity and value creation. Entrepreneurial attitudes, in turn, may refer to both business and social initiatives. An effective entrepreneur can be considered a person capable of creating (generating) personal and social wealth by developing a business resource and the ability to repeat these activities in different socio-economic conditions [21,22]. There is also an interesting view according to which entrepreneurship is equated with perceived new opportunities, although there are views according to which entrepreneurship means creating opportunities rather than perceiving these opportunities [23,24]. According to this approach, entrepreneurs are more focused on the process of achieving, rather than on the effects themselves. Therefore, the very process of implementation, creation of activities can be considered an element of a higher level of relevance. Entrepreneurial attitudes can also be related to the need for self-sufficiency of the inhabitants of these areas, which has implications for the reduced need for relationships and interaction [25]. Again, a large role is given to interaction and relationship-seeking, and the use of these interactions to gain knowledge, help, and support in introducing new initiatives. Relationships seem to have a definite beneficial effect on the level of entrepreneurship, especially in rural areas.

The result of entrepreneurial attitudes is the establishment of both business and social organizations, such as foundations, associations, and even social enterprises. Organizations that form in rural areas can be considered as those that are primarily aimed at supporting a common, social goal. In Poland, for example, Rural Housewives' Associations or Voluntary Fire Brigades operate in the form of associations. NGOs, among which associations and foundations are well known and most popular, are in many cases mistakenly believed to have the power to attract beneficiaries on their own at the very moment of their establishment and due to their ambitious agenda [26]. In accordance with the principles of functioning of social economy entities and principles borrowed from business management methods and techniques in third sector organizations, a standardized planning of activities is necessary which should produce economic effects. For this reason, entrepreneurial people who are associated in village associations as a rule rely only on their own activity. In the spirit of social enterprises, which are more in line with the principles of social business than associations and foundations, an interesting initiative has been developed to accelerate the development of rural areas, namely village-owned rural enterprises. Similar entrepreneurial activities have been introduced in Indonesia and China. The ownership of

enterprises is based on the resources of a given community and a given region, and the level of achieved effectiveness of the functioning of such entities depends, among others, on:

- Openness of management processes, which should be attributed to the community and adequately secured by appropriate regulations at the local level;
- Local communities should present active participation in planning, implementation and monitoring of the processes;
- Management of a rural enterprise should lead to benefits and results serving a given local community.

The above principles relating mainly to the management of rural enterprises unequivocally point to social benefit as the leading one. Cooperation of entrepreneurial persons, which materializes in rural areas in an institutional formula, promotes intrinsic motivation of co-creators. It is currently reflected and justified in the phenomenon of turquoise organizations. The change from traditional organizational forms based on functional structures is now becoming more and more noticeable. At the same time, the development of inter-organizational relationships is observed, which is explained by the growing importance of intangible factors [27].

In the agricultural context, the ideas of social entrepreneurship refer to the reduction of pollution, produced by agricultural machinery, as well as the use of land for the benefit of local communities. These ideas, when introduced to economic reality, can turn into social innovations. Innovations are treated as a basic objective of human capital [28] with direct relation to intellectual capital, which depends on competences and motivation of employees [29], members of associations, foundations of social enterprises. Thus, it seems that from the perspective of creating rural development strategies, the human factor and especially motivation and social capital are of vital importance.

3. Materials and Methods

Apart from the introductory literature analysis with studies of authors of more and less developed countries, the survey method has been applied for this study [30]. The questionnaire study, whose data are the basis of analyses for this paper, was called “Study of the impact of social economy on rural development” and was aimed at obtaining the necessary information from areas of Malopolska. The choice of this method appeared sufficient to collect standardized data and then necessary info [31].

Thus, the sampling plan was of non-probabilistic nature because under the grave pandemic conditions the choice seems the best option for quickly investigating consumers while guaranteeing their security [1].

The choice of the region is its specificity referring to the agricultural status but also cultural, entrepreneurial, and academic, which allows to consider the region as one of the strong potentials in terms of triple helix “in which the various spheres are autonomous but overlapping, not entirely distinct but not completely merged either” [32]. The total area of farms in Malopolska in 2019 was 687.3 thousand hectares and increased by 18.2 thousand hectares (by 2.7%) compared to a year ago. The area of farms in the province was 4.2% of the area of farms in the country. Individual farms used 96.7% (664.3 thousand ha) of the total area of farms. The number of farms with agricultural land in 2019 was 140.1 thousand, which accounted for 10.0% of all farms with agricultural land in Poland. Almost all farms in the province (99.9%) were owned by natural persons (individual farms). The unemployment rate is 4.1% and may be regarded as rather low; however, the overall level of development as measured by GDP per capita is not so high at only €11935. The share of medium-sized and large enterprises in this region represents only 0.7% of the total number of registered companies. The region is a leading place for tourist destinations in Poland. Unusual landscapes and beautiful nature, an impressive number of monuments and a unique atmosphere. The Tatra mountains, the Krakow–Czestochowa Upland, castle ruins, historical towns, wooden churches, spas with mineral waters, thermal baths, cultural events, still alive tradition, and delicious cuisine—these are just some of the attractions that wait here for tourists. The research projects in Malopolska represent the following

fields: technical sciences and energy, biological and medical sciences, agricultural sciences, physical and engineering sciences, and digital research infrastructures. Małopolska is also characterized by a high level of entrepreneurship: 9.0% of Polish entities were located in this region. Around 10% of the Polish startups come from Krakow, which places the regional capital on the third place in the country. Małopolska is one of the most important academic centers in Poland with more than 150,000 students, 106 accredited research laboratories, and 3100 ordinary laboratories in the region.

The study makes use of an in-depth analysis by exploring the defined topic to its full extent in more depth thus trying to cover the most important points of investigated subject. The questionnaire was anonymous, single-choice, and self-designed and was structured into four sections: the first containing seven questions, the second containing also seven questions, the third containing eight questions, and the fourth containing seven questions, altogether 29 qualitative questions.

All of them were five-point Likert scale closed questions. The questionnaire also included one control variable that was not of interest to the study's aims but was held constant for maintaining the reliability of the study.

The information about the link to the questionnaire was sent to more than 50 respondents online as well as via email by means of a snowball sampling method [32] with a request for their further redistribution therefore the exact number of people who were reached with the survey questions may be estimate as above a hundred.

The online research choice depends on quickly surveying specific subjects, thus guaranteeing security under pandemic conditions [33,34]. The selection criteria were people living in rural or rural–urban areas and at the same time professionally involved in the development of these areas (EU and national policymakers, operators in rural agency or associations, entrepreneurs etc.), but also people from outside these areas, however, having knowledge on rural development (academia, experts in rural development projects or activities, politicians etc.).

The survey was conducted using the CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interview) method in 2020. The process of analysis included several steps: (1) first, a pilot phase had been done for the reliability of the questionnaire and for validating the substantial part. This has been done with three experts in rural development in order to verify the clearness of the questions and the reaching the research's aims. Then, (2) the respondents were first sent information about the research by e-mail (general description of aims, criteria and methods, and guidelines). A recalling step (3) was implemented: indeed, some of them were interviewed by telephone, which resulted in obtaining feedback on the questions contained in the online questionnaire. The survey was answered by 43 people, all answers were correct and complete, and therefore each of them was qualified to undergo statistical processing.

Finally, statistical analysis was performed using SPSS software. The tools used in the statistical analysis were comparisons of data contained in graphs, as well as data from cross tabulations in which selected data were compared.

4. Results and Discussion

According to the respondents, microenterprises were considered as the most active entities operating in rural areas (Figures 1 and 2). The total cumulative value of affirmative answers is ca. 90%. Small enterprises were assessed as equally active, followed by medium enterprises and associations. According to the respondents, the activity of social enterprises and foundations is hardly visible. In line with other research [1,7], it should be noted that the role of medium enterprises is more strongly perceived at the same level of significance as that of micro businesses, as indicated by the percentage of strong affirmative answers (definitely YES).

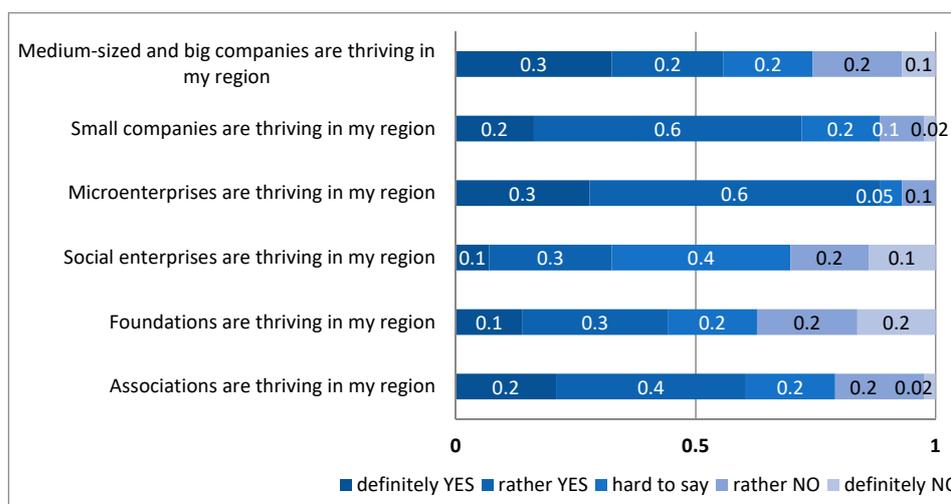


Figure 1. Most active entities in rural regions.

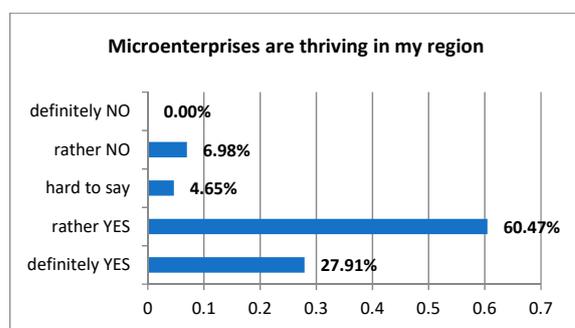


Figure 2. Opinion about activeness of microenterprises in the rural regions.

Less visible is the activity of organizations from the social economy sector, associations, or foundations. Associations were found to be the most active, and therefore the most noticeable. This seems to be due to the fact that simply associations are more popular than foundations as a form of conducting social as well as economic activity [1]. In Poland, in December 2019, there were 26,000 registered foundations and 117,000 registered associations [35,36]. It should be borne in mind that not all registered entities are active; only 70% of them are. In Małopolska, the area covered by the survey, there are about 10,000 of these entities registered.

It seems that the perceived regularity of micro and small business activity is also followed by the perception of the importance of those entities in local development in line with a recent study [1]. According to the respondents (see Figure 3), small and micro businesses have the greatest impact on the development. Foundations and associations were rated lower, although both these legal forms at a comparable level of significance. The analysis of the provided answers gives a basis to respond to the first research question concerning which sector is active in rural areas. Therefore, the answers show and highlight that the business sector is the most noticeable, especially micro (up to 10 employees) and small (up to 50 employees) businesses. However, it does not mean that the third sector is not noticeable. Thus, the business sector has the greatest influence on the development of rural regions. The above regularity can be deduced from the answers of respondents whose cumulative affirmative answers (rather YES and definitely YES were given to questions about the influence of medium-, large-, small-, and micro businesses.

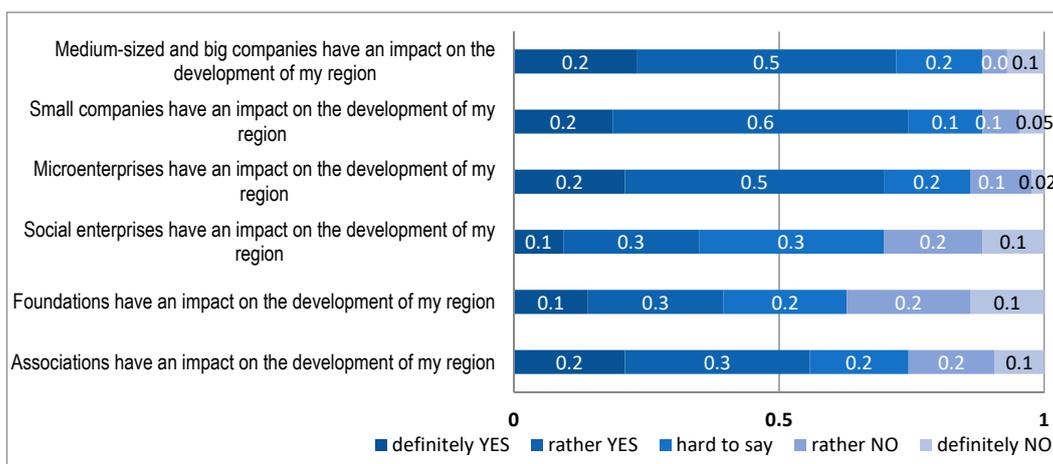


Figure 3. The opinion on the impact of different entities on the rural development.

Among the entities of the social economy sector, only the impact of associations on the development of rural areas was assessed in cumulative affirmative answers at more than 50%. A smaller half only sees the possibility of foundations and social enterprises determining change in rural areas. The given answers allow us to address the next research question, namely, which sector has the greatest influence on rural development: it is business according to the respondents. Thus, not only business is the most visible, but also the most effective.

If considering the factors determining the development of rural regions, infrastructural development is absolutely the most important (both the cumulative affirmative responses about it and the percentage of strong affirmative responses that is definitely YES). Each of the assessed determinants was generally considered to be important factors influencing the development of rural areas, but subsidizing the establishment of new enterprises and subsidizing the operations of existing profit-oriented business entities were considered to be at a similar although lower level of importance than infrastructure. A similar pattern of indicated answers relates to the earlier analyzed thread of the visible and positively assessed business activity in rural areas. The evaluation of the positive influence so far allows projecting confidence in this sector of stakeholders also for the future. However, as already evidenced in [7], it should be noted that the importance of the financial factor in the development of rural areas was also, although to a lesser extent, perceived when it comes to non-profit social organizations, such as associations. Interestingly, with respect to the factor of financial support of foundations, it cannot be unequivocally stated that it has a strong impact on the development of rural areas, and this is also confirmed in the evaluation of the activity of foundations in rural areas, which is also not indicated to such an extent as business or associations. A higher percentage of those assessing the positive impact of subsidizing activity found social enterprises. The percentage of strong affirmative answers concerning the influence of their financing on the development of rural regions is even higher, although only slightly, than the financing programs for existing enterprises. What is also interesting and appear in line with [1], most persons who regarded infrastructural development as a key factor for development of rural areas perceive the need for cooperation between business and public administration (Table 1).

Table 1. Opinion of those recognizing the impact of infrastructure development on rural development on recognizing the low level of public–private partnerships as a barrier to that development.

Infrastructural Development Has an Impact on the Development of Rural Regions	Low PPP Levels Are a BARRIER to Development in Rural Regions				Total
	Definitely YES	Rather YES	Hard to Say	Rather NO	
definitely YES	6	7	7	1	21
rather YES	1	10	8	2	21
rather NO	0	1	0	0	1
Total	7	18	15	3	43

Some of the persons (about 1/3) do not have a precise opinion on this issue; however, the development factor, i.e., cooperation between local authorities and business, is recognized by the respondents. Those who recognize the influence of medium and large business on rural development (Table 2), as well as those who recognize the influence of small business on rural development (Table 3), recognize the possibility of cooperation between business and public administration as a remedy to overcome development barriers for rural areas, although these opinions are not so polarized.

Table 2. Opinion of supporters of the view that medium and large business have a strong influence on rural development on the importance of public–private partnerships in this development.

Medium and Large Business Has an Impact on Rural Development	Low Level of PPP Is a BARRIERS to Development of Rural Regions (Municipality/County)				Total
	Rather NO	Rather YES	Hard to Say	Definitely YES	
rather NO	0	0	1	1	2
rather YES	3	8	8	2	21
hard to say	0	4	0	3	7
definitely NO	0	2	1	0	3
definitely YES	0	4	5	1	10
Total	3	18	15	7	43

Table 3. Opinion of supporters of the view that small business has a large impact on rural development on the importance of public–private partnerships in this development.

Small Business (up to 50 Employees) Has Impact on Rural Development	Low Level of Public–Private Partnerships IS A BARRIER to Development in Rural Regions				Total
	Rather NO	Rather YES	Hard to Say	Definitely YES	
rather NO	0	2	1	0	3
rather YES	2	9	8	5	24
hard to say	0	5	0	1	6
definitely NO	0	1	1	0	2
definitely YES	1	1	5	1	8
Total	3	18	15	7	43

Thus, the low visibility of public–private partnerships in non-urbanized areas can be recognized, while it seems that in case of infrastructure investments, it is medium and large business entities that are to be the key partners for the public administration. Thus, greater activity, e.g., in infrastructure, in the development of which business should have a share, as well as cooperation of business with public administration, may be regarded as a direction of activities which is possible to implement, and which is also perceived by respondents. Following the earlier remarks concerning crediting trust to business, one may

risk a statement that it is the business sector, which gives a positive sense to cooperation with public administration as evidenced in [3,4].

Of course, this should not demonize trust in public administration operating on its own. One should still bear in mind the specific area of considering the activity of these stakeholder sectors, i.e., rural areas. The low level of public–private partnership is perceived as a barrier to development, which seems to be a logical consequence of the answers analyzed earlier; however, according to the respondents, factors of a financial nature are crucial (Figure 4) in line with other findings [1,4]. Each of the barriers assessed by the respondents was verified positively, i.e., their negative influence on the development of rural regions was recognized. On the other hand, the highest percentage of cumulated affirmative answers (rather YES, definitely YES) was given to a financial factor—insufficient budget of local administration. Bureaucracy, low level of social involvement and generally low level of entrepreneurship of inhabitants were also perceived at a similar level. Interestingly, the most polarized responses in this category concerned insufficient budget of local public administration—this factor was generally considered by respondents to be the greatest barrier to development. Next positively assessed factors (both rather YES and definitely YES) constituting barriers to development are factors related to regulations, i.e., bureaucracy, followed by factors related to human and social capital, i.e., low level of entrepreneurship and social involvement of rural inhabitants and low level of cooperation with science, both among social sector institutions and public administration.

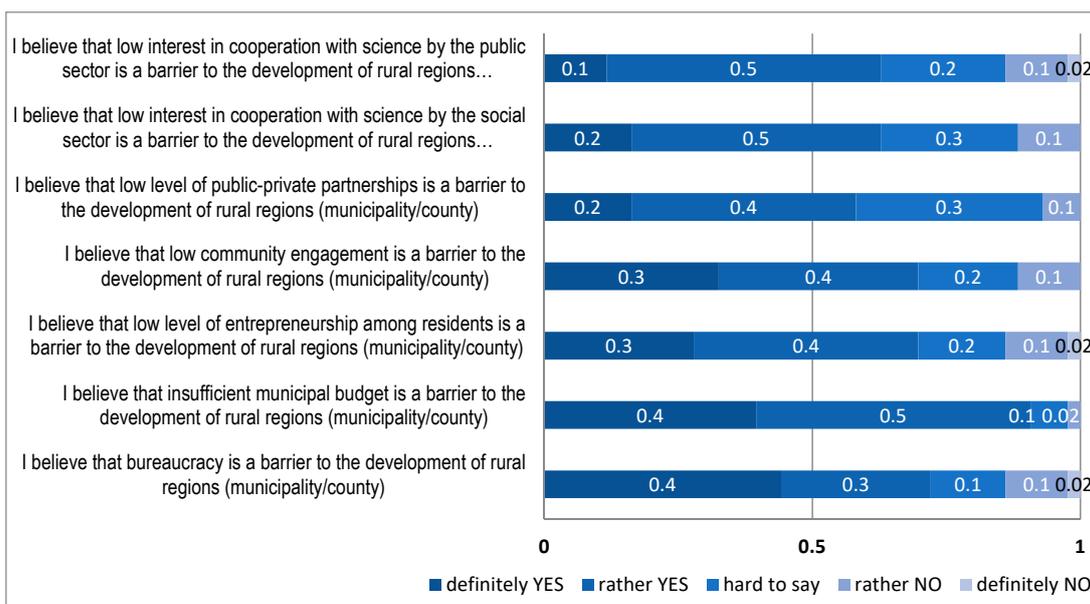


Figure 4. Barriers of rural regions development.

Half of those who perceived the influence of associations on rural development considered the low level of cooperation between social sector units and science as a barrier to rural development (Table 4). Taking into account data from graphs (Figures 4 and 5) indicating that although cooperation with science is recognized both by the social sector and the public administration as a development barrier for rural areas, in the opinion of respondents these are not key factors.

Table 4. Opinion of those recognizing the IMPACT of associations on rural development, on the low interest in cooperation with science by the social sector.

Associations Are Entities that Have an Impact on Rural Development	Low Interest in Cooperation with Science by the Social Sector Is a BARRIER to Rural Development				Total
	Definitely YES	Rather YES	Hard to Say	Rather NO	
definitely YES	2	4	3	0	9
rather YES	1	6	5	3	15
hard to say	2	5	1	0	8
rather NO	1	2	2	2	7
definitely NO	1	3	0	0	4
Total	7	20	11	5	43

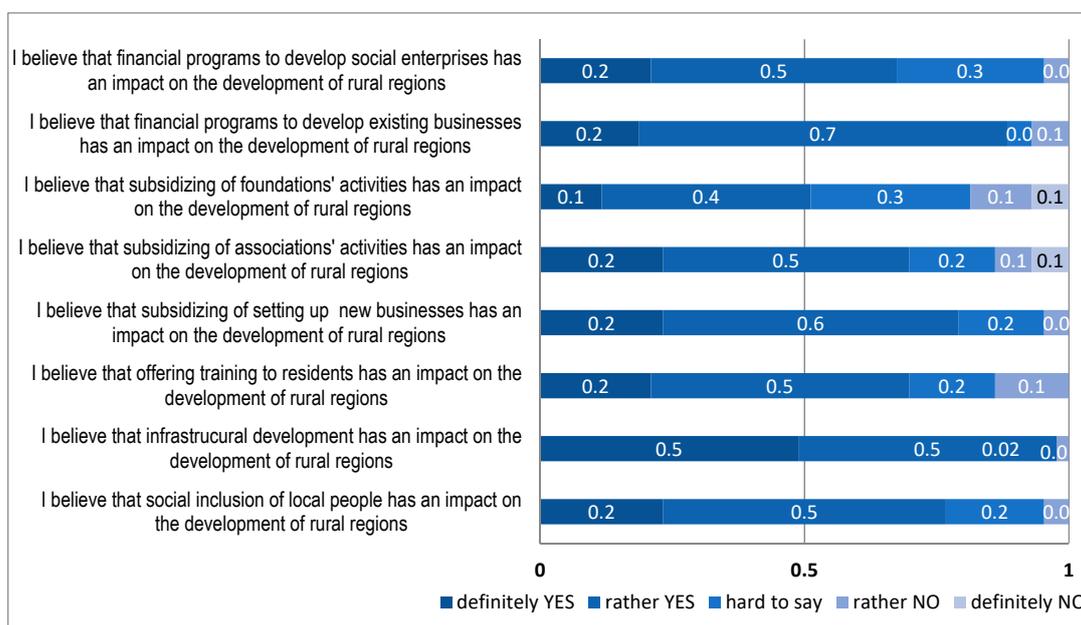


Figure 5. Factors determining rural development.

These barriers are not as big development barriers as entrepreneurship or, first of all, financial barriers at the disposal of local authorities. Therefore, the role of the science sector does not seem to be so important, which may also result from the territorial remoteness of large scientific centers or lesser involvement or invisible involvement of science in rural areas.

Finally, the rural regions have big potential, but their role is underestimated taking into account the massive financial streams, which are directed to the highly-urbanized sites. Apart from underfinancing of rural regions, the problem is depopulation, which is a result of looking for better life conditions. This may be the reason of lifestyles widely promoted among young people who choose to leave the difficult conditions on the countryside and go to cities with more advanced infrastructures and life conditions.

Thus, there is quite an interesting challenge for scientific institutions in rural areas. Undoubtedly, universities, whose presence is visible in rural areas, include agricultural universities, which does not mean, however, that this presence cannot be more visible. Moreover, as evidenced in [1,4], rural areas may also pose a challenge for a different type of scientific institutions than agricultural universities.

5. Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to identify the stakeholder sector with the greatest impact on rural development. In order to achieve this goal, five research questions were formulated. The knowledge obtained from the answers to these questions allows to outline a picture of the perception, by persons participating in the survey, of factors having positive and negative impact on the development of rural areas.

The SME sector plays the greatest influence on the development of rural regions according to the respondents. Since SMEs are represented by the active rural habitants this role is not just visible but brings values to rural habitants. Therefore, the effects of SMEs or even microenterprises sector can be easily perceived.

The literature indicates quite clearly that the issue of rural development is an important subject for many reasons [1,2,4,8]. Obviously, the basic criterion for understanding the significance of these regions is agricultural and animal production which takes place in rural areas. However, the situation in rural areas, similarly as in urban areas with higher or lower density, undergoes changes. They result, among others, from globalization, technological digital development, and scientific and technological progress in general, which further influences economic processes, production, but also institutional and management processes, mainly in the European Union, where we talk about environmental protection and sustainable development [1,3,11]. In addition to global changes, mainly of scientific and technological nature, rural areas are characterized by a trend of decreasing population (depopulation), but also by a change in the nature of services provided there and a generally different perception of the possibilities of living in the countryside or in non-urbanized areas [1,7]. The hustle and bustle of metropolitan life, as well as the changing needs of aging populations, contribute not only to the need for medical services, but also for infrastructural development in suburban areas, or even in more remote and less urbanized areas, not to mention non-urbanized areas and rural areas. The above characteristics is one of the reasons for the need to discuss the development of rural areas. Current trends in the tourism market and the leisure market in general favor non-urbanized areas. Technology has facilitated exploration of areas so far difficult to explore. Horse tourism is also much more noticeable and popular than it was before, which further increases recreational values of non-urbanized areas. The above trends allow us to consider the issue of rural development as an important one. The issue of development of non-urbanized areas can be considered from the point of view of interest of, among others, local authorities, taking into account the identified directions of changes that affect these areas. Therefore, the aim of this study was to try to identify the sector of stakeholders that could be described as having the greatest influence on the development of these areas.

In the course of analysis, however, the above-mentioned objective could be slightly modified and an attempt could be made to determine which stakeholder sectors are interested in the development of rural areas and to what extent, as well as which sectors are interested in which directions of development of non-urbanized areas, mainly rural areas.

In the course of analyses based on the respondents' answers to the questionnaire on rural development, it turned out that small business, including microentrepreneurs, i.e., small enterprises of up to ten persons, was considered the most noticeable sector. It can only be assumed that these are also, or mainly, family businesses that operate effectively in rural areas. Among other sectors, the influence of associations in these areas was also noticed, which is probably related to visible effects of the activities of such groups as volunteer fire departments or rural housewives' associations, more widely known as rural housewives' circles.

The activity of science is least connected with the development of rural areas, as it can be directly interpreted from the answers given by the respondents. The low level of co-operation of science with social organizations is perceived as a development barrier, as well as the low level of co-operation of public organizations with science. On the other hand, as far as public institutions are concerned, the low level of budgets they have at their disposal is considered to be the greatest barrier, the more so as infrastructure

development is considered to be the most important determinant of rural development. Therefore, it seems that the perception of rural development consistent with the results of the study is related to small businesses and human involvement. That is, the level of entrepreneurship and resourcefulness. Then, the capital factor available to the public administration should be taken into account, and it should be added here that it is the local authorities who have the best knowledge of the investment needs in the region. The role of associations is recognized, whose activity manifests itself mainly in social involvement, regarded as an important development factor when it comes to the situation in rural areas. The public administration should therefore first of all have an adequate budget with which to strengthen the infrastructure. Moreover, as a sector with an overriding role in monitoring and animating socio-economic life, the authority's tasks should include supporting local entrepreneurship with respect to economic as well as social activities.

Although there is relatively little recognition of the influence of medium and large enterprises on rural development, those who consider this sector important in rural development are strongly convinced of it, their opinions are more polarized, which may mean a greater belief in the possibility of influencing the lives of the inhabitants and overall development. It also seems that a greater polarization of opinions has its foundation in the experience of greater knowledge of reality and real effects produced by the functioning of medium and large enterprises in rural areas.

It may also be assumed that the issue of possible intersectoral cooperation becomes much more significant if one assumes that there are medium or large enterprises operating in the region, if only due to the possibility of participation in public-private partnership projects.

Far from being exhaustive, this work presents the limitations of using a too small sample size that decreases the power of the study and increases the margin of error. Researchers were compelled to limit the sampling size because of the COVID-19 outbreak. Further research in a non-pandemic context will aim to widen the sample and investigate the relationship by means of a social network analysis analyzing social structures through the use of networks and graph theory and in terms of nodes (individual actors within the network) and the bonds and edges (relationships that connect them). What can also be concluded from the results of the empirical analysis is the issue of still underestimated strength of intersectoral cooperation, which is able to generate added value and influence the increase of entity potential, which seems to be particularly important in rural areas. The results of the research indicate that the involvement of scientific institutions in the improvement of the situation in rural areas is small, as for the moment, which should be explained by the fact that the respondents perceive the direct involvement and results of activities in these areas to the greatest extent.

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