

## Development experiences in local space – case studies of peripheral rural areas in Hungary

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The definition and delimitation of rural areas, rural restructuring and rural differentiation have been in the focus of scientific debates for decades. Many argue that even the definition and exact spatial delimitation of the rural areas are problematic, while others still emphasize the necessity of exact definitions. The OECD and the countries of the European Union are committed to preserve rural values and improve rural life quality, which underlines the actuality of theoretical questions about rurality. In this light, rural studies are not only examining theoretical and methodological problems, but their results have practical use for spatial planning, regional and local policy making too, thus contributing to the improvement of rural life quality.

The primary aim of this study is to give an overview of the dilemmas of defining rurality, to present a classification of the Hungarian rural areas and to describe the processes taking place in the different rural area types.

In 2013, the authors participated in the rural research program “Hungarian rural areas in the European space – differentiation and types of rural micro-regions”, conducted by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the Hungarian National Rural Network. With the consideration of some novel aspects, a new method was developed for the classification of the Hungarian rural micro-regions called *járás*. For the comparative analysis of the newly formed types of rural micro-regions, the available statistical data and local documents were used, and with the participation of local stakeholders, case studies were prepared. Eight micro-regions were selected for further empirical research involving fieldwork, and the characteristics, development needs and development experiences of the selected micro-regions were examined in detail. After this, a detailed picture could be drawn about the common rural problems and the frequently experienced obstacles of rural development.

The research project also had important findings for the stagnating or lagging peripheral micro-regions. They share a lot of similarity in their characteristics and development possibilities, with big inner differences in their economic and social conditions on settlement level. Their attempts to break out of underdevelopment scarcely led to success, mostly when charismatic local leaders were not only trying to attract investors, but were able to strengthen the local community, form partnerships and think on micro-regional level. There is small chance for such kind of development in peripheral micro-regions and small villages with poor availability. In these settlements, investments carried out by outsiders and foreigners are often seen as uncertain and temporary, but development based on local resources also failed to produce breakthrough. Rural tourism, for example, still plays a smaller role in local economy than expected. Although good practices can be found in a few settlements, it is far from enough for breaking out of their underdeveloped state. In most cases, the investments were resource and time consuming, yet only slightly increased the micro-regions' income.

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