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## VILLAGE RENEWAL PLANS IN MAŁOPOLSKA AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR THE PRESERVATION OF NATURAL HERITAGE ON RURAL AREAS

### Abstract

*The paper presents an analysis of renewal plans of 26 localities in Małopolska region as regards their impact on preservation of the natural heritage of the village. These plans, preconditioning application for co-financing under the measures “village renewal and development”, often contain proposals of investments whose execution may result in destruction of the natural character of rural areas. Such may be the effects of, for instance, extension of paving lots on market squares of localities, concrete walking paths or construction of viewing towers.*

*Omission of the aspect of natural heritage preservation in the analysed plans may result from formulations used in RDP 2007-2013, which do not require to meet the criterion. The paper postulated to include it in the new RDP and relevant regulations.*

**Keywords:** rural areas, village renewal plans, natural heritage preservation, co-financing, investments.

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### Introduction

Natural heritage is not explicitly defined in Polish legislation. The criteria adopted by UNESCO for objects to be inscribed on the World Heritage List refer to “superlative natural phenomena” and as such do not cover the “common” natural heritage in rural areas [17]. Polish Nature Conservation Act of 2004 provides for “preservation, sustainable use and renewal of natural resources, creations and components which include, e.g., landscape, urban and rural green

areas and trees [14]. Nevertheless, in literature [6, 13], and also in public debate [7], it is increasingly frequently pointed out that laws and regulations currently in force fail to inadequately protect landscape and spatial order. Such debate revolves around questions concerning the ways of spatial planning and management, and it cannot be comprehensively described in this paper. This article focuses on one of the factors which affects the face of rural areas, namely rural renewal programmes. The first objective of this paper is to verify the hypothesis that rural renewal plans carried out at the moment (which give grounds for applying for funds under the “rural renewal” measure) in majority do not contribute to natural heritage protection in rural areas. The second objective is to formulate conclusions which may be helpful in transforming the said plans into a tool enhancing preservation.

### **Research methods**

This paper analyses the legal acts which define objectives and assumptions for rural renewal measures, as well as 26 plans to renew towns/villages in Małopolska [8]. The said plans came from the area of Pogórze Ciężkowickie (eastern Małopolska) – from nine municipalities (gminas) associated in two Local Action Groups (LAG)<sup>1</sup>. Such selection of localities has a twofold justification. Firstly, the selected area is of little tourist appeal (it is hilly, with traditional agricultural landscape) and it seems that protecting the natural image of the area is important, but not as much apparent as in localities of strictly tourist character. Additionally, the localities were selected with a view to ensure that their development conditions (environmental, economic and social) are alike, which allowed for drawing joint conclusions for all examined villages.

Legal acts as well as plans to renew towns/villages were analysed to verify the hypothesis that rural renewal plans implemented in Małopolska do not serve as a rural heritage protection tool. The analysis performed allowed for formulating postulates for changes in the currently drafted Rural Development Plan for 2014–2020 and in relevant regulations. In drawing conclusions, the authors made use of experience of the Bavaria region which has long experience in implementing rural renewal programmes.

### **Rural renewal objectives and assumptions**

Already back in the 1960s, in Austria, Switzerland and southern Germany rural renewal was a recognised rural development tool improving the quality of life for rural inhabitants as well as the image of rural areas. Undertaking such activities became a symbol of moving away from seeing rural areas only through the prism of agriculture [1]. Strengthened social inclusion of rural in-

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<sup>1</sup> The Dunajec Biała LAG, comprising the following municipalities (gminas): Ciężkowice, Pleśna, Zakliczyn and Wojnicz; and the Pogórzańskie Stowarzyszenie Rozwoju LAG, comprising the following municipalities (gminas): Tuchów, Gromnik, Szerzyny, Rzepiennik Strzyżewski and Ryglisce.

habitants and improved cultural and natural image of a village was regarded as an opportunity to stop depopulation of rural areas caused by the falling employment in agriculture. Positive experience of many regions in conducting such programmes made the latter a good rural development support tool in the European Union, co-funded under the second pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy. Such programmes are also implemented in Poland, as stipulated in the Rural Development Programme for 2007-2013.

The legal grounds for co-funding actions enhancing rural renewal under the Common Agricultural Policy are provided in the Council Regulation on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development [11]. Article 52 of the said regulation provides for allocating funds to improve the quality of life in the rural areas by: providing basic services for the economy and rural population, village renewal and development, and conservation and upgrading of the rural heritage. The latter element – important from the perspective of the hypothesis proposed in this paper – should be (in accordance with Article 57 of the said regulation) implemented, e.g. through investments associated with maintenance, restoration and upgrading of the natural heritage and with the development of high natural value sites. Polish Rural Development Programme for 2007-2013 contains provisions compliant with the idea of the EU regulation. In the diagnostic part, “high tourist and natural value of agricultural landscape” is indicated as one of the strengths of Polish rural areas, and “the maintenance of high biodiversity of rural area ensuring high tourist and natural values of the rural landscape” is perceived as a development opportunity. Preservation of natural heritage in rural areas is, thus, diagnosed as important for the development of Polish rural areas. However, in the part of the RDP describing priority axes<sup>2</sup>, there is a dissonance between justification of the “village renewal” measure and its objectives and the scope of investments eligible for co-funding. The justification reads as follows “(...) support [is] granted for the implementation of projects related to the public area management, including maintenance, reconstruction and improvement of cultural and natural heritage of rural areas (...)”. On the other hand, the objective of this measure was described as contributing to the development of “rural population identity, preservation of cultural heritage and specificity of rural areas (...)” [9]. Thus, preservation of natural heritage is not explicitly defined as an objective of measures taken within the framework of village renewal. It may be assumed that the provision concerning “preservation of (...) specificity of rural areas” was considered by the authors of the programme as giving grounds for measures related to natural heritage protection. Nevertheless, the absence of an explicit formulation of this objective may have been one of the reasons for omitting this aspect of village renewal in measures taken at local level, as will be discussed later. Also

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<sup>2</sup> “Village renewal and development” may be implemented under axis 3 (measure 313, 322, 323) and 4 (Leader) RDP 2007-2013. In both cases the same rules govern the applications for co-funding of investment projects [8].

the scope of investment projects that may be financed under village renewal does not cover actions aimed at preservation of natural heritage. Only “promotion and preservation of the historical heritage” is mentioned. One may interpret the above statement as suggesting that natural character of rural areas is an element of their historical heritage. Such wording, however, does not give high rank to this issue.

A detailed catalogue of eligible expenditure under the “village renewal and development” measure is defined in the Ordinance of the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. Three (out of sixteen) categories may be regarded as fostering the preservation of natural heritage in rural areas. The provision about “setting up and arranging green areas, parks and other leisure areas” as well as the possibility of co-funding the “purchase of perennial seeds or planting material” may be interpreted as fostering such preservation. The third category of costs is related to the “management of sites of special importance for satisfying the needs of citizens, and fostering social contacts due to their location and functional and spatial features” – which again provides for preservation of village social and natural heritage. Further in the same item, however, we read that the management of such areas of special importance may be done “in particular by restoration or construction of parking lots, pavements or street lighting”. Such detailed explanation shows that the aim behind establishing this category was not the preservation of natural heritage but rather infrastructural/ spatial development [10].

The above-mentioned fragments of legal acts describing the “village renewal and development” measure show a considerable dissonance between assumptions adopted at European and national levels and the ways proposed to achieve them. Preservation of natural heritage has not been defined as an objective of village renewal and the description of investment projects that may be implemented under this measure does not give unambiguous grounds to undertake initiatives towards this end.

### **Assumptions made in village renewal plans**

According to the above-mentioned Ordinance of the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, the basis for applying for co-funding of actions under village renewal is a village renewal plan. Such plan, apart from village characteristics and inventory of its resources, should also include an assessment of village strengths and weaknesses, a description of sites of special importance for satisfying the needs of citizens, and a description of planned investment tasks. Such plans, therefore, are a good source showing what are the strengths of towns/villages as seen by local community, and also how the community intends to develop such strengths. In view of the aim of this article, in analysing the village renewal plans, the author focused on the provisions on preservation of natural heritage in villages subject to examination.

In all the plans that have been analysed, the natural character of villages was considered as their strength. One comes across such statements as “highly

attractive natural resources” (Ciężkowice), “almost intact natural environment” (Swoszowa), “natural landscape values” (Szerzyny), “high value of natural environment”. Identifying natural values as important for village development seems justified. The area is hilly, with several landscape parks around, and with traditional agricultural landscape largely preserved. Thus the fact that natural character of the examined villages was regarded as their asset raises no objections. However, the possibility to exploit the natural values of a given village is identified as a development opportunity only in nine plans. They talk about “a growing demand in Poland and in Europe for tourist services based on natural resources” (Ciężkowice), and also about “arising opportunities for co-funding the promotion of natural values” (Bruśnik). The remaining plans contain general statements about an opportunity in the form of developing tourism and agri-tourism, which may imply that the importance of natural heritage was noted. However, failure to identify such an opportunity in a clear manner may be a reason for ignoring this aspect while planning investment.

The adopted development vision and objectives, forming a part of development plans, also reflect the assumptions based on which specific investment proposals are formulated. In eleven plans that have been analysed, maintaining the natural character of a village is considered as one of the development priorities or forms the basis for the adopted vision. The following statements may be interpreted in this way: “attracting new inhabitants and tourists with aesthetic qualities (...)” (Więckowice), “promoting such values as clean water and unique landscape” (Siemiechów), and “offering direct contact with nature” (Polichty). Protection of natural heritage is not defined here as a direct development objective, but rather as a means to implement other priorities. Thus, it may be surmised that its protection is envisaged. Other eleven plans<sup>3</sup> do not identify natural values as an element of the vision or development objectives, even though they contain several references to cultural heritage, e.g.: “taking advantage of historical heritage assets” (Lusławice), “village cultivating local traditions” (Lubaszowa), as well as references to aesthetic values, perceived in infrastructural terms: “clean and aesthetic locality, with access to water and sewage systems” (Karwodrza), protection of natural environment thanks to extension of the existing wastewater collection system and construction of a water supply network” (Wesołów). Priorities defined in this way may result from the above-mentioned statements used for describing village renewal assumptions. Although one cannot question the legitimacy of measures aimed at protecting the environment by means of technical infrastructure improvement or cultural heritage protection, yet such measures fail to account for all the assets of rural areas and their specific character. Table 1 below presents a summary quantitative data demonstrating how the principle of village natural heritage protection is observed in foothill village renewal plans.

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<sup>3</sup> In four plans, development vision and objectives were been defined.

Table 1

*Preservation of natural heritage in village renewal plans*

Category	Advantage	Development opportunity	Vision/ development targets
Number of plans including natural heritage preservation scheme in a given category	26	9	11
Number of plans not including natural heritage preservation scheme in a given category	0	17	11

Source: own study.

The assumptions of foothill village renewal plans show that natural values, even though perceived as an asset, are usually not regarded as a factor on which a development strategy could be based. Using specific features of rural landscape or other assets of natural environment is regarded as an opportunity or a development objective in less than 50% of plans in the villages that were studied.

### **Character of implemented investment projects**

Description of the foreseen investment projects is an essential part of village renewal plans. The nature of foreseen investment projects, rather than adopted visions or development objectives, is crucial in deciding whether natural heritage specific for rural areas will be preserved in a given area

An analysis of investment projects described in village renewal plans shows that four kinds of undertakings may affect the protection of natural heritage in rural areas, namely: creating parking spaces, paving footpaths, management of green areas and constructing viewing towers.

1. Parking spaces. In the plans that were analysed, building parking lots is the most frequent investment project that may change the natural character of the village. Creating parking spaces is frequently regarded as a priority investment project. Negative assessment of such projects, due to their interference with natural character of a given village, is based on the proposed localities for parking lots. For example, in seven village renewal plans construction of a parking lot is the first, and frequently the only way to revitalise the village centre. Parking spaces are to be created on central square or in other area described by the authors of the projects as a “village central point”. In justifications for expanding the existing parking lot in the most attractive spot in the village we read that “this is of key importance for enhancing social life (...) and for improving the image of village centre” (Zborowice), and that “the project should improve the image of the market square (...) in a manner ensuring that material heritage and tradition of the ancestors are preserved” (Ciężkowice). Strangely enough, in two village renewal plans, the construction of a parking lot in village centre is the only measure intended to promote

tourist values (Siemiechów, Polichty). Allocating for a parking lot land that was recovered due to demolition of an old public utility building (such as school – Lubaszowa, may also be questionable. Such utility buildings were usually located in village centre, and thus other ways of utilising the recovered land could have been suggested, more suitable considering the natural character of rural areas. In effect of building concrete parking spaces in village central points such localities may become similar to urbanised areas, thus negating the principle that rural cultural and natural heritage should be preserved. Treating parking lots as a priority has many reasons (car as a sign of prestige, inadequate public transport in rural areas, aversion to physical effort), nevertheless locating such facilities outside village centre may be postulated. In a few plans, it is suggested that parking places should be built or extended near cultural centres, churches or sport grounds (Siedliska, Łowczów, Szerzyny, Żurowa). Such facilities are not located in the “heart” of the village and their function justifies the need to construct parking spaces in their vicinity. In three villages, planned investment projects (usually it was such modernisation of public utility buildings or renovation of village centre) provide for refurbishment but not extension of the parking lot (Jamna, Lusławice, Bogoniowice), which may result from the will of economic management of space in village centre.

2. Paving footpaths. All the plans that were analysed provide for the construction of sidewalks along main roads going through village centres. Such investments are justified by safety of pedestrians and as such it should not be questioned. However, paving (laying cobblestones or concrete) of recreational footpaths is debatable. Such footpaths include walking lanes in manor parks, tourist trails, and sections of paths commonly used by inhabitants (for example, leading to the river (Lubaszowa, Turza, Biadoliny Radłowskie, Czerмна, Swoszowa). The need to revitalise paths used by pedestrians is obvious – people do not want to walk in the mud. Nevertheless, paving them with concrete not gravel is questionable – gravel would allow for maintaining the rural character of villages. It is significant that frequently the authors of plans refer to such footpaths as “promenades” – a word typically used in urban context – which may suggest an attempt at organising space like in urban centres, especially in view of the fact that such investment is frequently accompanied by extending parking lots. In one of the plans (Biadoliny Radłowskie) it is proposed to cover three kilometres of a tourist trail with asphalt, arguing that “(...) it will significantly improve safety of inhabitants and enrich the tourist offer of the locality. The trail runs through area of great tourist appeal, abundant in forests and with numerous agri-tourist farms. This place has traditionally been used for recreation by inhabitants of Tarnów agglomeration”. Such justification raises questions as tourists from big towns, making use of agri-tourist offer, would rather look for rural landscape.

3. Management of green areas. Twelve of the analysed village renewal plans provide for management of green areas, which may be an expression of the will to preserve natural heritage in rural areas. However, measures related to green area management are not described in detail in the plans, but are given as slogans: “management of green areas and new plantings” (Lubaszowa), “arrangement of green areas” (Ołpiny, Szerzyny), “revitalisation of green areas” (Żurowa), “organising green areas” (Łowczów, Więckowice) or simply “green areas” (Wesołów). Such measures are a part of larger projects, involving renewal of village centre, management of a site with former school building which was demolished, or revitalisation of area surrounding a renovated building (village clubhouse, farmhouse, etc.). In three plans (Siedliska, Burzyn, Karwodrza) management and organisation of green areas is identified as a separate task, and as such it is described in more detail. However, the justification of this task (positive change of village image) and the scope of work foreseen are rather general and give no idea what the effect of actions undertaken may be. Thus, it is difficult to assess their contribution to the preservation of natural heritage in a given village.  
In one of the analysed plans, a project to develop an un-built site owned by local parish (Turza) is described in detail. Development plans include creating a park with a meeting place for inhabitants and for tourists. Even though walking lanes in this park are to be paved with cobblestones, the project, as a whole, will contribute to the preservation of village natural heritage, as parks surrounding manor or churches are an important element of such heritage.
4. Viewing towers. When analysing village renewal plans in terms of their contribution to the preservation of natural heritage in rural areas, the popularity of plans to construct viewing towers raises concerns. Viewing towers were planned in four villages (Dąbrówka Szczepanowska, Bruśnik, Czerмна, Turza). The hilly terrain along with largely maintained agricultural landscape and scenic river valleys justify the creation of viewing points and possibly even viewing towers. Considering, however, the strong impact of such investment on the landscape, as well as the similarity of landscape features in analysed localities and their spatial proximity, it seems that a single viewing tower would be sufficient in the entire area of two Local Action Groups. In other places, viewing points should be planned on elevated sites.

### Conclusions

The proposed investment projects described in renewal plans for villages in Ciężkowickie Foothills confirm the hypothesis that, in majority, such plans do not contribute to the protection of natural heritage in rural areas. Even though the management of green areas is frequently mentioned, the importance given to new parking spaces and paving footpaths and trails suggests that the authors of such plans do not care for preserving the rural character of villages covered by them.



The above analysis of renewal plans for foothill villages gives grounds for formulating a number of observations that may be useful in transforming village renewal programmes into a tool supporting the preservation of natural heritage of Polish rural areas.

As pointed out in the introduction, the lack of legal acts protecting “common” landscape is a handicap in implementing the principle of village natural heritage protection. Current legal regulations envisage some forms of site protection (national parks, landscape parks, etc.) and of protection of individual landscape elements (wayside shrines, crosses, alleys). These regulations, however, give no grounds for protecting landscape only because of its traditional rural character, may be helpful to implement the provisions of the European Landscape Convention, ratified by Poland back in 2004, where landscape as such is recognised as “a basic component of the European natural heritage” [16]. Also an amendment of the Act on spatial planning and development (e.g. introducing the obligation to develop spatial development plans), postulated by many circles, could establish better grounds for protecting natural heritage in rural areas<sup>4</sup>.

Another point to be made concerns provisions defining the assumptions for and ways of financing village renewal plans. Although, the EU Regulation states that the aim of village renewal is, e.g. reconstruction and improvement of natural heritage, the Polish RDP for 2007-2013 mentions only cultural heritage and specificity of rural areas. Thus, local government officials and other local community leaders involved in drafting village renewal plans may, when planning investment, automatically omit the natural aspect. Also the ordinance concerning the “Village renewal and development” measure gives no proper incentive to take actions aiming at natural heritage protection. In the part dedicated to kinds of costs eligible for refinancing, the construction of parking lots is mentioned, e.g., as an investment project that would positively affect shaping “of sites of special importance for satisfying the needs of citizens” [10]. Thus, a postulate should be formulated that in the currently developed Rural Development Programme for 2014-2020, preservation of natural heritage should be added to the provisions on village development aims, and the new Ordinance should not suggest any investment that gives rural landscape some features characteristic of urbanised areas.

Considering the fact that the natural heritage aspect was omitted in the analysed village renewal plans, it would be advisable to use relevant experience of other countries or regions. In Bavaria (a region similar in many aspects to Małopolska), for example, initial actions referred to as village renewal (implemented in the 1960s) also focused on paving with asphalt all the access roads to fields and farms [4]. In subsequent years this paradigm changed, mostly due

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<sup>4</sup> The so-called Landscape Act, proposed by the Polish President and containing several provisions to limit free space management will most likely not be adopted in the current form by the Polish Sejm [15].

to rural depopulation, highlighting the importance of protecting natural heritage for maintaining the specificity of rural areas. The motto for village renewal procedures implemented in the 1990s was that not every farm must have an asphalt drive right to the house. This allowed for reducing the costs of implemented projects and for protecting rural areas from further urbanisation [5]. Currently, protection of nature and rural landscape is one of four basic aims of integrated rural development programmes (Ger. *Integrierte Ländliche Entwicklung*), which include measures connected with village development [3]. The growing (since the 1990s) population density in Bavarian villages as well as the number of overnight stays and the large number of non-governmental organisations (more than 4 times higher per 1000 inhabitants than in Małopolska) may indicate the right direction of changes in looking at measures contributing to village renewal [12]. Making use of such experience at the stage of formulating legal grounds for the village renewal measure, as well as using such experience locally when developing village renewal plans, could promote more effective protection of natural heritage and rural areas in Poland.

Last but not least, one could ask to what extent the tendency to urbanise rural areas is a result of poorly developed public transport between rural areas and the closest major urban centre. This problem may result, on the one hand, in a need to use a car, thus exerting pressure to widen existing roads and build parking lots, and on the other hand, it may encourage the transfer of urban landscape elements to rural areas. This question remains beyond the scope of this study, and it indicates possible future research directions. The example of Bavaria quoted above, and also the observed evolution in looking at assumptions for rural renewal in other regions of the “old” European Union [2], may suggest that preservation of natural heritage in rural areas is achievable only when a city (thanks to easy access) is no longer an object of aspiration for rural area inhabitants.

From the analysis conducted, it results that village renewal plans currently implemented in the Polish foothill villages fail to promote the protection of natural environment in rural areas. Investment projects involving parking lot extension, paving footpaths and trails or constructing a viewing tower may have a devastating effect on the character of rural areas. However, an unequivocal response to the question what is the reason for such an approach is difficult to find. On the one hand, it may result from the fact that the natural aspect of village renewal has been omitted in RDP, and on the other, it may be an expression of the aspiration of village inhabitants to create space resembling urban areas.

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