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## The meaning of tradition in the modern world: Village representatives in Poland - Institution in transition

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**“Institutions in Transition –  
Challenges for New Models of Governance”**

**IAMO Forum 2010, 16-18 June 2010 / Halle (Saale), Germany**

**The Meaning of Tradition in the Modern World: Village Representatives in Poland –  
Institution in Transition**

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**Abstract:**

The main aim of this paper is to discuss the current situation of village representatives (*soltysi*) in Poland in the times of dynamic changes taking place in the Polish countryside in the last decades. The importance of the institution of village representatives manifest itself in two main dimensions. Firstly, it is supported by the power of tradition – village representatives are deeply rooted in the historical evolution of rural self-government in Poland. Secondly, this institution is a part of the current system of local democracy. Due to the pressure to implement the bottom-up models of governance, the full potential of this institution should be realized and discussed. This discussion is based on the small-scale quantitative data from the surveys conducted among the village representatives and also the inhabitants, which gives the opportunity to confront both perspectives. It occurs, that, in the changing reality, the institution of village representative should be supported with more than just the forces of tradition.

**Key words:** village representatives, rural changes, the role of tradition

## 1. Introduction

The main aim of this paper is to discuss the current situation of village representatives (*soltysi*) in Poland in the times of dynamic changes taking place in the Polish countryside in the last decades. In Poland, the function of the village representative (*soltys*) can be described as a long-term social institution in Fernand Braudel's sense. Historically speaking, this institution has a long and well established tradition. Its roots can be traced back to the processes of rural settlement under German and Dutch law, which occurred in the Medieval Age. Depending on the region, the range of influence and competences related to this institution were significantly changing over time. Nevertheless, village representatives (*soltysi*) were always operating as a link between the inhabitants of a given community and the authorities on the superior administrative level, e.g. the landlord in the earlier times or, recently, the mayor and the municipal council.

Nowadays, Polish village representatives operate in reality which changes rapidly. Firstly, in the 1990s the decentralization reform was implemented in Poland. It means that the local democracy institutions were built and started to be used in the conditions of a democratic state. This decentralized system created new institutional framework for rural self-government in Poland. Secondly, there have been significant changes in the Polish rural communities since the early 1990s and later due to the accession of Poland to the European Union. The type of local resources which are accessible and used in practice largely determines the differences between the rural communities. In relation to such aspects as e.g. the closeness of urban areas, the central or peripheral location, the demographic structure, the type of agriculture and the processes of urban-rural migration, the rural communities may face different trajectories of development. Due to all these processes of change just briefly mentioned above, Polish countryside can be described as an area in transition. In consequence, the institution of village representative is in transition as well: the rural tradition faces the rapidly changing local and global contexts.

The importance of the institution of village representatives manifest itself in two main dimensions. Firstly, it is supported by the power of tradition – village representatives are deeply rooted in the historical evolution of rural self-government in Poland. In other words, the village representatives always were present and it's really hard to imagine Polish rural communities without them. Secondly, this institution is a part of the current system of local democracy. Village representatives are the piece of this system, which operates on the rural community level – as near to the inhabitants as possible. Due to the pressure to implement the bottom-up models of governance, the full potential of this institution should be realized and discussed.

Therefore, this paper is mainly focused on the possible roles of rural representatives in the context of the processes of change observed in the rural communities in Poland. The structure of this article reflects the main aspects of this discussion. Firstly, the most crucial processes of change influencing the rural communities in Poland will be briefly described. Secondly, basic facts and figures related to village representatives will be presented. Finally, the village representatives' possible roles will be discussed in relation to their own and to the inhabitants' views on the matter. This discussion is based on the small-scale quantitative data from the surveys conducted among the village representatives and also the inhabitants, which gives the opportunity to confront both perspectives. In result, we face the situation of ambiguity of the current role of village representatives. Their presence is generally recognized and appreciated but rather not associated with definite responsibilities. The village representatives describe themselves more in terms of the hosts of the communities or even the leaders. Therefore, it must be claimed that the strong and long-term tradition of the institution

of village representative is not enough. This function must be formally defined in a more precise way.

It has to be mentioned, that the village representatives in Poland have been rather rarely the subject of studies of scientists and researchers, even within the field of rural sociology. Due to the very limited results of empirical research on the chosen groups of rural representatives, this paper is more to inspire discussion than to offer a complete diagnosis.

## **2. The Crucial Processes of Change in Rural Communities in Poland**

According to literature, rural areas in Western countries have been negatively affected by such long-term processes of change as urbanization and the decrease in agricultural workforce (e.g. SINGELMANN 1996), which in consequence triggered the processes of rural-out migration and depopulation (e.g. ROBINSON 1994) and increased the number of aging communities. All these phenomena seem to intensify especially in the second half of the previous century. On the other hand, strong counter-trends may be also observed. Due to the implementation of various policies, which were to support the revitalization of rural areas, we face the processes of counter-urbanization or even population turnaround (ROBINSON 1994). In fact, some rural areas are actually “colonized” by middle class migrants from bigger cities (e.g. STOCKDALE 2009). Also, the matters related to ecology and nature, together with local cuisine, handicraft, history and customs have recently become very fashionable and strongly appreciated as a part of lifestyle.

Because they are a mixture of different economic, social and cultural influences, the rural communities and their contexts are becoming increasingly varied. The urban and rural lifestyles and cultural patterns mix while the social structure within the communities changes resulting in the variations in the rural economy. These processes are partly captured by the “multifunctional development of rural areas” (e.g. WILKIN 2008). Thanks to the increasing importance and accessibility of ICT, the geographic distance and the impact of central / peripheral location have been diminished – the rural areas are constantly being included in the global Internet network (e.g. GRIMES 2000). Therefore, the classic descriptive dichotomy “urban–rural” is not appropriate anymore to describe the changing reality of contemporary rural areas. The “rural” seems to be really complex and unclear nowadays: it refers more to social constructs than to a materially distinguished issue (HALAMSKA 2009).

All the general trends mentioned above influence also the rural areas in Poland. However, the importance and strength of their impact differs depending on the region and even the type and localization of a particular village. The forces of dynamic rural development apparent in some areas create a stark contrast with stagnation, unemployment and poverty observed in others. The latter phenomena are cumulated especially in the parts of the country, where the State-owned Farms (*Państwowe Gospodarstwa Rolne – PGR*) were established during the Polish People’s Republic (*Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa*).

To be more specific, Poland now faces an increasing trend of rural-in migration which includes the migrants from urban areas. These trends are the most visible in rural communities located around the biggest cities (FRENKEL 2008). This process leads to suburbanization of some villages, where “old” inhabitants coexist with a group of “new” neighbors, who usually represent a different lifestyle and have different expectations regarding local development.

According to statistical data the percentage of the people who completed education at the university level is much lower on the countryside than in the cities, but an increasing trend toward higher education in the rural areas is, nevertheless, observed. Between the year 2004 and 2006 the percentage of people with higher education grew here from 5,4% to 6,4% (compared to an increase from 17,5% to 20,7% within the population of cities) (FRENKEL 2008: 53). It is worth mentioning that the level of educational aspirations grows significantly

within the rural youth and their attitudes towards education are strongly supported by their parents (BORAWSKA 2005).

What is more, the several programs based on both EU and national funding have been recently directed to rural areas in order to strengthen the processes of bottom-up local development (e.g. The LEADER+ Program, The Rural Areas Development Program 2007-2013, “Act Locally” Program of the Polish-American Freedom Foundation and many others). The great majority of non-governmental organizations in Poland are still registered in urban areas (about 70%), but the number of NGOs functioning in rural communities is growing slowly but steadily (HERBST 2008a: 36-44). Also, due to the opportunities of getting financial support for local initiatives, working by “doing projects” becomes more and more popular among rural grass root leaders and local organizations. In addition, the increasing interest in ecology and the various resources of local tradition results in the forging and strengthening of local identity in rural communities and regions. The local tradition (food, handicraft, history, music and dance) has recently come into fashion and many rural collective activities and projects are related to these issues (e.g. MALIKOWSKI 2009; NIZIŃSKA 2009).

All these trends, briefly mentioned above, influence significantly the local context of rural communities in Poland. Urban lifestyles, fashions and the promotion of “good practices” – the successful projects of local development, which have been well implemented in various parts of Poland result in growing social pressure on rural leaders, local organizations and institutions of self-government. Consequently, also village representatives face this reality and have to live up to the expectations of the inhabitants. It is worth finding out how they see their own role in such circumstances and how this role is perceived by the inhabitants. However, before we move on to the discussion of these questions, the most relevant facts and figures about village representatives in Poland will be presented.

### **3. Basic Facts and Figures about Village Representatives in Poland**

As it was already mentioned, the institution of village representatives in Poland has a long and well established tradition, which dates back to medieval times. During the Polish People’s Republic, the village representatives were institutionally included in the system of local government controlled by the state. In some cases, they were ideologically involved in the activities of the Polish United Workers’ Party (*Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza*) but mostly they represented the interests of their communities on the municipal level. In the times of permanent shortage of supplies on the centrally controlled market, such goods as e.g. concrete needed for building a local road, could not be acquired without negotiations with the municipal officials. This role was usually performed by the village representatives. As Barbara Lewenstein states, “[They represented] the community in “municipal negotiations” for getting one good or another, competing in this process with other villages. The more influence the village representative had in the municipality, the higher position he had in the community. (...) Therefore, the village representative, having access to the municipal officials, was the necessary intermediary between the inhabitants of the village and the local government and therefore his/her role was strategic.” (LEWENSTEIN 1999: 148-149).

Following the decentralization reform implemented in Poland in the early 1990s, according to the Municipal Self-Government Act<sup>1</sup> the scope of competence of the representatives depends on a sovereign decision of the authorities on the municipality level. In other words, each municipality government has freedom to decide what range of responsibilities should be passed to the village representatives within their administrative territory. Currently, the number of rural administrative communities (*sołectwa*) in Poland,

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<sup>1</sup> The Municipal Self-Government Act was released on 8th of March, 1990.

which equals the quantity of village representatives (*sołtysi*), exceeds 40 000. The position of rural communities (*sołectwa*) within the Polish system of regional administrative units is presented in the following scheme:

**Table 1: The system of administrative units in Poland.**

The Administrative Level	The Current Number of Units
Regional Level	16 Voyvodships
Regional Level	314 Poviats and 65 Cities with Poviats Status
Local Level	3478 Municipalities, including 1586 Rural Municipalities
<b>Rural Community Level</b>	<b>40459 Rural Community Administrative Units</b>

Source: „Rocznik Statystyczny Województw” (Gus 2009: 36-37).

According to statements of The Municipal Self-Government Act, the rural community, being the lowest administrative unit (*sołectwo*) is described as a subordinate unit (*jednostka pomocnicza*) of the municipality; therefore, it has neither its own legal identity nor an independent budget<sup>2</sup>. In this context, village representative is the institution of executive power in a given community, usually elected every 4 years<sup>3</sup> in a gathering of all inhabitants (*zebranie wiejskie*). The rural representative’s activities are supported by the elected members of the rural village council (*rada sołeczka*) (OSTROWSKI 1995).

As was previously mentioned, the range of “officially” legitimized competence of the representatives depends strongly on the individual preference of each municipality’s authority. Within this framework, the institutional “strength” of the village representatives and the community itself can be narrowed down or broadened according to the decisions made on the municipality level<sup>4</sup>. However, in reality, the tendency to broaden the competences of rural communities in terms of increasing their institutional and financial independence from the communes can be rather rarely observed<sup>5</sup>. Specifically, from the municipal perspective, the village representatives are usually expected to:

- 1) communicate news about the municipal authority’s plans and decisions to the inhabitants of a given rural community;
- 2) facilitate the implementation of activities in the municipality on the community level;
- 3) inform the municipal authorities about the important needs and local problems voiced by the inhabitants of the community;
- 4) officially represent the given rural community at the municipal or regional level;
- 5) collect the local taxes from the inhabitants on behalf of the municipal officials<sup>6</sup>.

All of these “official” obligations of village representatives are rather limited and do not leave much space for the representatives’ own initiative in solving local problems. They are not provided with any specific tools of power or influence. However, the expectations of the community inhabitants and also the ambitions of representatives themselves often go beyond the official obligations. This situation creates a tension that further embitters the

<sup>2</sup> However, on 20th of February, 2009, The Rural Community Fund Act was released. According to this Act, the municipality council is able to create a so called rural community fund, within which rural communities are financially supported. The creation of a rural community fund is not obligatory and depends on the sovereign decision of each municipality council.

<sup>3</sup> Usually, the cadency of village representatives lasts 4 years, but in some municipalities it lasts 3 or 5 years. The length of the cadency depends on the municipal regulations, which should be included in the charter of each rural subordinate unit (*sołectwo*) (IWANICKA 2009).

<sup>4</sup> According to the Municipal Self-Government Act, 8<sup>th</sup> of March, 1990.

<sup>5</sup> There is no sociological or other research result available on this subject. This kind of opinions has been occurring in press and magazines related to the area of local government, e.g. *Wspólnota*, *Gazeta Sołeczka*.

<sup>6</sup> This list is based on my frequent conversations with various village representatives from different parts of Poland.

representatives, often already feeling powerless and circumscribed in their activity within such institutional framework (LEWENSTEIN 1999).

In sum, nowadays the institution of village representative seems to be more or less flexible as a function and can be shaped both by the demands of the municipal self-government and the needs of the inhabitants recognized and/or assumed by the municipal officials. However, this “institutional flexibility” means that the function of village representative may be formed and modified also by the representatives themselves and the inhabitants, who express their expectations e.g. by choosing a certain person for this function. Therefore, the “operational definitions” of this institutions used both by village representatives themselves and the inhabitants are definitely worth analyzing.

#### 4. The Perspective of Village Representatives

In this part of the paper the village representatives’ view of their own role in the community will be discussed by analyzing their responsibilities and activities. This paragraph is based on the preliminary results of a short pilot survey conducted among three different groups of village representatives. The first group is composed of the representatives that are members of the association of rural leaders from the Świętokrzyskie Voyvodship (N=70). This group is referred to in the paper as Sample 1. The second group consists of members of the association of Wielkopolskie Voyvodship (N=74). This group is referred to in the text as Sample 2. The third group (Sample 3) is composed of the members of the village representatives’ regional association from the Małopolskie Voyvodship (N=50)<sup>7</sup>. All three surveys were conducted between June 2008 and October 2009 during the general gatherings of members of both of the mentioned regional associations of village representatives.

Due to this fact, the representativeness of the data is limited to the chosen regions of Poland and also to the village representatives, who are associated with the respective regional organizations. Nevertheless, these results are solid starting point for a more advanced research. They should not be generalized on the whole population of village representatives in Poland. The data show some interesting tendencies, which may be significant also in the other regions.

**Table 2: The Characteristics of the three samples.**

Sample	Meeting	Date	Organizer	Participants	N
1	The 9 <sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Association of Village Representatives from the Świętokrzyskie Voyvodship	28-29.06.2008	The Association of Village Representatives from the Świętokrzyskie Voyvodship	The members of the Association and also the invited village representatives from the other regions*	74
2	The Meeting of Mayors and Chairmen of Municipal Councils with the Village Representatives from the Wielkopolskie Voyvodship	21.03.2009	The Association of Village Representatives from the Wielkopolskie Voyvodship	The members of the Association and also the invited representatives of local self-government	74
3	The Contest for the Title of the Best Village Representative in the Małopolskie Voyvodship	10.10.2009	The Association of Village Representatives from the Małopolskie Voyvodship	The members of the Association	50

\* Only the members of the Association took part in the survey.

<sup>7</sup> It must be emphasized that the size of both samples changes in relation to different questions. Therefore, while presenting the results, the size of the sample in case of particular questions is given.

According to the results, most of the respondents were elected for this position for the second time (the 2<sup>nd</sup> term). The village representatives in all three samples are mainly middle-aged people, usually being between 51 and 60 years old. Regarding education, most village representatives in Samples 1, 2 and 3 are graduates of secondary schools: high schools (more characteristic for women) and trade schools (more characteristic for men). Tertiary education (university level degree) was indicated only a few times. Furthermore, three main sources of household income pointed out by the respondents were: pension (retirement, disability or old age pension), agriculture and non-agricultural work. Almost all of the village representatives of interest are married, usually with two grown up children who are over 18 years old. Surprisingly, in general, almost half of the respondents did not originate from the particular communities in which they were presently village representatives. This, however, could be explained by taking into consideration that people from families, which are well-known, trusted and established within the community are usually elected. Outsiders may also be preferable as they are neutral and are not a side in local conflicts and divisions existing in many communities.

According to the selected descriptive data presented above, the examined village representatives could be succinctly described as people who are “available” for the community. In other words, due to their usual age, typical sources of income and their family structure, it may be expected that they would possess the flexibility in their schedules to perform the responsibilities of a village representative and would be able to spend most of their time in the community itself or in its surroundings.

Asked about their opinion about the most important responsibilities of village representatives<sup>8</sup>, the respondents from all three samples pointed out a broad spectrum of various answers. However, the role a Host of the Village, who takes care of the local infrastructure, solves day-to-day problems voiced by the inhabitants and also facilitates the communication within the community, was expressed the most often in all three samples. No significant gender differences in respect to this matter were observed. What is more, also the number respondents, who pointed out the role of a Local Leader” is rather significant. In comparison, the responsibilities of the village representative associated with the category of a “Tax Collector” were last to mention in all three samples.

**Table 3: Responsibilities of village representative (Sample 1, N=64).**

<i>Responsibilities</i>	<i>Women (29)*</i>		<i>Men (28)*</i>		<i>In General (64)</i>	
	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
“The Tax Collector” (mostly collecting the local taxes, informing the inhabitants)	2	6,9	1	3,6	3	4,7
“The Helper” (taking care of special groups, e.g. poor people)	9	31,0	6	21,4	15	23,4
“The Representative” (intermediating between the municipality and inhabitants, representing the interests of community)	4	13,8	10	35,7	14	21,9
“The Host of the Village” (taking care of the infrastructure in the community, solving day-to-day problems, communication)	6	20,1	12	42,8	18	28,1
“The Local Leader” (motivating, integrating the inhabitants)	4	13,8	6	21,4	10	15,6

Source: own research. \*The numbers of women and men altogether do not sum up to 64, because not all respondents marked their gender in the questionnaire.

<sup>8</sup> Open question.

**Table 4: Responsibilities of village representative (Sample 2, N=60).**

<i>Responsibilities</i>	<i>Women (18)*</i>		<i>Men (39)*</i>		<i>In General (60)</i>	
	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
“The Tax Collector” (mostly collecting the local taxes, informing the inhabitants)	1	5,5	0	0,0	1	1,7
“The Helper” (taking care of special groups, e.g. poor people)	0	0,0	3	7,7	3	5,0
“The Representative” (intermediating between the municipality and inhabitants, representing the interests of community)	1	5,5	5	12,8	6	10,0
“The Host of the Village” (taking care of the infrastructure in the community, solving day-to-day problems, communication )	11	61,1	23	59,0	34	56,7
“The Local Leader” (motivating, integrating the inhabitants)	5	27,8	6	15,4	13	21,7

Source: own research. \*The numbers of women and men altogether do not sum up to 64, because not all respondents marked their gender in the questionnaire.

**Table 5: Responsibilities of village representative (Sample 3, N=40).**

<i>Responsibilities</i>	<i>Women (12)</i>		<i>Men (28)</i>		<i>In General (40)</i>	
	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
“The Tax Collector” (mostly collecting the local taxes, informing the inhabitants)	0	0,0	0	0,0	0	0,0
“The Helper” (taking care of special groups, e.g. poor people)	2	16,7	1	3,6	3	7,5
“The Representative” (intermediating between the municipality and inhabitants, representing the interests of community)	1	8,3	3	10,7	4	10,0
“The Host of the Village” (taking care of the infrastructure in the community, solving day-to-day problems, communication )	8	66,7	18	64,3	26	65,0
“The Local Leader” (motivating, integrating the inhabitants)	1	8,3	4	14,3	5	12,5

Source: own research.

As for the actions undertaken by the respondents, the village representatives from all three samples focused mainly on improving and maintaining the local infrastructure, such as e.g. local roads and pavements or water-supply and sewerage systems. The list of the 5 most frequently mentioned activities recently performed by the examined village representatives clearly shows that they feel responsible for the improvement of living conditions within their communities. It is worth mentioning that both women and men village representatives are equally concerned about the “technical” issues related to community infrastructure. Due to the lack of gender differences related to this matter, the activities successfully implemented by the respondents are presented without women’s and men’s subgroups. The examined village representatives are involved rather in “hard” community projects associated with the infrastructure than in the “soft” ones focused more on the integration. This result may be explained by the fact, that this kind of activities are more visible and easy to evaluate by the inhabitants as “useful” / “not useful” or “successful” / unsuccessful”.

**Table 6: Successfully implemented activities (Sample 1, 2 and 3).**

Sample 1 (N=61)		Sample 2 (N=69)		Sample 3 (N=42)	
“Top 5”Activities	N	“Top 5” Activities	N	“Top 5” Activities	N
Local roads, etc.	26	Local roads, etc.	24	Local roads, etc.	28
Establishing / renovating the buildings of public property	10	Establishing / renovating the buildings of public property	23	Establishing / renovating the buildings of public property	19
Playing field	6	Playing field	10	Pavements	18
Water-supply infrastructure	6	Pavements	6	Sewerage infrastructure	8
Street light infrastructure	6	Organization of the local fete	6	Street light infrastructure	7

Source: own research.

According to the results of this small-scale research, in Sample 2 the self-definitions of the village representative’s role are the closest to the functions of a Local Leader, who is responsible for the social integration of the inhabitants, engaging them in the cooperation for their local surroundings and building the bonds. The answers in Sample 1 and 3 indicate that these respondents see themselves more as people, who “are ready to serve their community”. In other words, the institution of village representative is rather based on the response to the day-to-day problems and needs expressed by the inhabitants. Nevertheless, all of them definitely feel the responsibility for the improvement of living conditions in their communities, especially in terms of technical and social infrastructure (the role of a Host of the Village).

To sum up, the examined village representatives express the readiness to live up to the expectations and trust of their inhabitants. Basically, they perceive their role in a rather flexible way, depending on the voice of the people of the community. On the other hand, their main activities are much more focused on the improvement of local infrastructure than on the organization of the community in the broad and long-term sense. The examined village representatives seem to be also less sensitive to the processes of change observed in the rural areas in Poland. They rather stick to solving the precise and particular problems than create more innovative visions and ideas. This might not prove to be enough, especially in the context of more “suburban” rural communities.

## 5. The Perspective of Inhabitants

According to the literature, in Poland the interest and involvement in the local issues is more often observed in the rural communities than in the cities, especially the big ones. For example, the turnout in the local self-government elections is higher within the rural population than among the urban one. Moreover, the inhabitants in rural communities are more likely to take care of their surroundings and participate in local community gatherings (HERBST 2008b). Despite the general crisis of the neighborhood bonds, the inhabitants in rural communities interact and cooperate with the people next door more often than it happens in the cities. Therefore, we may assume that the population of rural communities is also likely to be involved in the activities of rural self-government in their villages, especially the actions undertaken by the village representatives.

Unfortunately, the empirical data related to the attitudes and opinions towards the village representatives among the rural population is rather poor. Only very few sociological studies on this issue have been recently conducted and their scale is rather limited to certain. Interestingly, the last research projects of this matter<sup>9</sup> were initiated by The National Association of Village Representatives (*Krajowe Stowarzyszenie Sołtysów*). It means, that also village representatives themselves need more self-knowledge in order to be able to

<sup>9</sup> I will directly refer to the results of these research project in this section of the paper.

construct their role in a more strategic way and also to develop public awareness of their functions.

According to the research conducted in 2006, the inhabitants of one of the municipalities in the Wielkopolskie Voivodship, which is dynamically changing due to the strong influence of Poznań city, were asked about their attitudes towards the institution discussed in this paper. It occurred, that the role of village representative in this particular municipality was rather unclear for the people. The respondents often expressed the opinion that village representatives were just one type of municipality officers and could not distinguish their competences. However, despite the lack of this knowledge, they assumed that the village representatives must have significant power and influence on the municipal level. In consequence, the respondents' expectations were too high to be addressed successfully by the village representatives (FIGIEL 2006: 51). In addition, the respondents could not precisely point out the village representative's obligations in their community.

According to the results of other empirical study on the inhabitants from 10 rural municipalities located in different regions in Poland, in 2009 about 90% of all respondents knew the name and address of their village representatives and were satisfied with their actions. On the other hand, the respondents were not sure about the village representatives' exact responsibilities. The majority (38,7%) pointed out that the village representatives in their communities are responsible for collecting local taxes. The rest of the respondents expressed opinions formulated in a rather general sense: "taking care of the inhabitants and the village" (21,5%), "keeping order and cleanliness in the village" (17,1%). What is more, there was also a problem with naming the activities, which their representatives should perform. 32% of the overall sample indicated that they do not have any idea about it (WĘGIERKIEWICZ 2010: 115).

These results show that the role of village representatives is not really clear for the inhabitants, especially in the rural communities affected by the processes of suburbanization. Therefore, it must be claimed that the strong and long-term tradition of the institution of village representative is not enough. This function must be formally defined in a more precise way. Also, both village representatives themselves and the inhabitants of their communities have to learn how to effectively maximize the potential of this institution in a particular local context. The tradition and general importance of village representatives seems to be recognized by the inhabitants, the problem is how to develop their role.

## **6. Conclusion**

The function of village representative can be described as an institution in transition, which is a part of more general processes of change observed recently in the rural areas and communities in Poland.

The most important and visible sign of this transition is the unclear definition of the role of village representatives. The representatives themselves seem to concentrate more on facing the particular problems related to the community infrastructure. The role of a community leader who initiates the involvement of the inhabitants and creates a vision of development is also partly reflected in some of the answers. The role of the village representative may be much more confusing for the inhabitants, especially in the suburban rural communities, which rapidly lose their connection with old rural traditions.

It must be emphasized that in the changing reality, the institution of village representative should be supported with more than just the forces of tradition. The institutional framework allows the flexibility of the function of village representative, thanks to which the representative's responsibilities may be adjusted to the particular local context. The "content" of this function should be created as a result of the processes of dialogue

between the inhabitants, municipal self-government and the village representatives themselves. The sooner this kind of dialogue takes place, the more effectively the representatives' potential will be used.

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