

Stanisława SOKOŁOWSKA
and Laura PŁATKOWSKA-PROKOPCZYK*

RURAL SELF-GOVERNING ORGANISATIONS DURING THE PERIOD OF ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION

The first formalized rural self-governing organizations in Poland were already established in the 19th century. The activity of these organizations varied according to the existing social, political and economic conditions, yet their role has always remained the same: the basic goal behind the activity of a local self-governing body is to represent the interests of a rural community.

More specifically, the main functions of rural local self-governing organizations include the following: supplying means of production to farmers, purchase of crops, rendering services pertaining to production and living, raising producers' professional standards, perfecting the quality of livestock designed for breeding, representing and defending farmers' and country-people's interests, creating institutional forms of farmers' participation in taking decisions in matters concerning their own village and community, developing agricultural education and promoting culture [Sokołowska, 1994, 77]. Thus, the activity of local autonomous organizations influences the quality of life in the country, as well as its development, to a great extent.

The change in the economic system, which entails departing from a centrally planned economy and developing a market economy system, which is characterized by laws so different from those in operation before, should, as it seems, promote a rise in farmers' participation in the process of decision making as regards the issues related to their own villages and communities. The participation of farmers in this process may

* Prof. Stanisława Sokołowska, Dr. Laura Płatkowska-Prokopczyk, Opole University, Faculty of Economics.

manifest itself in their taking part in the activity of rural organizations, *i.e.* professional or cultural organizations, or in their participation in local government activity in the region.

This article aims to describe rural self-governing organizations active in the Opole Province, farmers' participation in the activities of these organizations and to evaluate the activity of local rural governments. It also undertakes to outline changes in farmers' participation in rural organizations during the period of transformations of the socio-economic system.

Intuitively, the changes that have occurred in the economy since the beginning of the 90s should have influenced the development of the activity of individual farmers and local autonomous organizations. Accepting the assumption above, the next phase in the research was conducted successively in 200 and in 100 private farms located in the Opole Province (in 1991 and 1992, respectively), yielded surprising results. The latter indicated that in 1991, farmers' level of interest in the activity of local country self-governing organizations, as well as their participation in local councils was significantly lower than in 1985 (Table 1). However, it is worth stressing, that as soon as 1992, a rise in farmers' participation in the activities of these organizations was recorded. Moreover, farmers' interests were now directed towards the activity of territorial government.

This research showed that farmers knew about the existence of local rural self-governing organizations, including one founded in 1990 in the Opole region, *i.e.* the Cultural Society of the German Minority (CSGM). Still, the respondents' participation in the activities of these organizations was of a low level. The highest percentage of members of such organizations among the respondents was recorded in CSGM (amounting to 38%) and in the Volunteer Fire Brigade (VFB) (31% of participants being farmers), the Local Country Women's Circle (CWC) attracted 18% of the respondents (or their wives), whereas 13% of those questioned were members of the Community Cooperative "Samopomoc Chłopska" (CCSC). Members of Agricultural Centers (AC) made up 12% of those questioned, and another 10% were members of Cooperatives of Farmers' Centers (CFC). Membership in Dairy Cooperatives (DC) amounted to 11%. In comparison with 1991 a rise in branch unions, in which 9% of the respondents participated, was noted (as they declared).

The results of the research conducted between 1991 and 1992 thus indicate a slow process of adjustment of local autonomous organizations to the new socio-economic conditions. After a decisive decrease in farmers' interest in the activity of such organizations up to 1991, the next year brought about a rise in farmers' participation, despite all the negative el-

ements of the transition of the country's economy. The results presented above allow us to make optimistic prognoses of a gradual process of activation of local self-governing organizations, and of farmers within the framework of these organizations. In view of these findings, it seems most interesting to analyze the data related to farmers' membership in local government organizations towards the end of the 90s.

In 2000, new research was conducted with the aim of identifying the local self-governing organizations that function in the country and also those in which respondents take active part. Farmers evaluated, too, the accessibility of these organizations, their contact with the residents of villages, as well as their effectiveness in fulfilling their basic functions.

First of all, the degree of farmers' knowledge about the organizations that operate in the Opole region was measured. The results proved that there are local rural organizations functioning in a great number of villages in the region. For instance, the following function in the respondents' villages: Village Council (VC) (listed by 72% of the respondents), VFB (62%), CWC (53%), CSGM (53%) and Union of Breeders (UB) (51%). Particularly in the case of VFB, the continuing rise in farmers' knowledge about the activity of the organization and also their active participation is not surprising. After all, the brigade is one of the oldest organizations and highly respected by small local communities. They were established in a natural manner as a form of protection in the event of fire and other natural calamities; they also undertook a number of tasks of a social character. One can say that VFBs are multi-functional associations, with a range of additional functions which surpasses other organizations that operate in the rural environment. In order to fully present this organization, it is worth noting that VFBs function according the powers given in the regulations of the Act on Associations of 10 January 1996, including subsequent amendments. In the light of this document, the supervising body, *i.e.* the Voivode (provincial president), can control this organization, yet it is only a court of law that can execute a given decision. Thus, VFB, as an association of a free, self-governing, lasting character, is a non-profit body that determines its own aims, program of activity and organizational structure, as well as one that passes internal acts concerning its activity and which bases the latter on the non-profit activities of its members (Art. 2 of the Act on Associations) [Samulak, 1999, 136 ff.]. Consequently, it can be said that VFB reflects basic rural values, which is confirmed by the research conducted.

Furthermore, 38% of the respondents live in villages where agricultural cooperatives function, and 36% in ones where there are community councils. These organizations are well known to farmers, some boasting of a long history, *e.g.* the first units were established as early as the se-

cond half of the 19th century [Kozuch, 1999, 101]. In turn, the CSGM, which is a relatively new organization (it was established in the Opole region in 1990), also enjoys growing popularity as the results of the research prove. Other organizations – cooperative banks and the Union of Silesian Farmers (USF) were indicated by 16% of those questioned as being in operation in their villages. A similar number of the respondents (15%) mentioned the Union of Silesian Country Women (USCW), and a slightly lower number listed such organizations as: DC (12%), CCSC (11%), CFC (11%), Circle of Agricultural Counseling (11%), Agricultural Production Cooperative (11%) and Agricultural Chambers (9%). Only 6% of the respondents indicated that the Union of Planters operates in their villages. The most surprising result is the low frequency of the presence of Agricultural Chambers, whose range of activity is relatively wide, often interfering with the competence of other existing self-government structures, as for examples those of agricultural circles of branch unions. Moreover, this is an organization of long standing, hence well known to farmers. This organization would be thus expected to enjoy greater popularity. However, the results of the research prove otherwise. A question arises as to whether this is a temporary crisis or a more serious and lasting one.

The results of the research of 2000 showed that however much the farmers tend to know about the existence of rural self-government organizations, the level of activity as regards their participation in the organizations is low.

As in 1992, the CSGM earned the greatest popularity with the respondents (a membership of 31%) as far as local self-governing organizations are concerned. Next, 21% respondents were members of VFB, whereas 20% declared their membership in ACs and 18% – in UB. Membership in the CWC was indicated by 16% of the respondents (or their wives). As few as 13% of those questioned are members of village councils, even though as many as 72% of them listed this organization as being active in their villages. In comparison with 1992, the interest in the activities of such organizations dropped by 12% (in 1992 25% of the respondents were members of village councils). In the case of the remaining local self-governing organizations the membership rate did not exceed 10%. About 10% of the respondents were members of Commune Councils, 6% – UP, 5% – USF. Another 5% were customers of cooperative banks, a small number were interested in the activities of the Circle of Agricultural Counseling (4%), DC (4%), the USCW (4%), and also that of the Agricultural Chamber (3%), while membership in the Agricultural Production Cooperative was as low as 2%.

The results presented above leave no doubt as to the insufficient degree of farmers' involvement in the activities of organizations which represent their own interests and defend their rights. Moreover, they seem to confirm the assumption raised earlier that Polish farmers are not ready to participate in decision-making processes affecting their professional activities. Despite the fact that the new economic system yields such a possibility, the adjustment process is very long and slow. This seems to be the case as the research shows.

The results of the research carried out, as well as their comparative analysis enables us to understand the lines of changes in the functioning of self-governing organizations and their role in the country. This is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Farmers' membership in self-governing organizations in the years 1985, 1991, 1992 and 2000

No.	Name of organization	Membership in organizations (%)			
		1985*	1991	1992	2000
1	Agricultural Center	47.0	11.0	12.0	20.0
2	Country Women's Circle	14.7	1.0	18.0	16.0
3	Cooperatives of Agricultural Centers	27.0	×	×	—
4	Unions of Breeders	26.3	4.0	8.0	18.0
5	Union of Planters	48.2	1.0	1.0	6.0
6	Dairy Cooperatives	24.7	3.0	11.0	4.0
7	Communal Cooperatives 'Samopomoc Chłopska'	26.3	•	13.0	—
8	Cooperatives Bank	27.1	•	8.0	5.0
9	Participation in village meetings	26.0	×	×	×
10	Volunteer Fire Brigade	19.9	10.0	31.0	21.0
11	Folk Sports Union	8.0	1.0	1.0	—
12	Cultural Society of the German Minority	×	•	38.0	31.0

*For comparison, the authors also included in Table 1 the data concerning farmers' membership in self-governing organizations in 1985, that is a few years before the beginning of the socio-economic system transformation.

Source: Data based on our own research – Sokołowska, 1989, 125; Sokołowska, 1994, 84; Krawczyk et al., 1998, 36.

Analyzing the data in Table 1, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- the beginning of the transformation brought a drop in farmers' participation in all self-governing organizations;
- the year 1992 saw a rise in or maintenance of the level of farmers' involvement, in no case did there occur a decrease in the level;

— in turn, between 1992 and 2000, the majority of organizations suffered a decrease in farmers' participation in the activity of rural self-governing organizations except in three cases (nos. 1, 4 and 5), where an increase occurred.

Apart from some tendencies of changes in the years, in which the research was conducted, it is worth noting that three out of the twelve rural self-governing organizations analyzed did not win even minimal interest on the part of farmers. In the case of nos. 7 and 11 this state has been maintained since 1988, whereas in the case of nos. 9 and 3 — since 1991, when all of the organizations went through a crisis.

On the basis of the numerical data concerning farmers' participation in the activities of self-governing organizations, a positive aspect was noticed, *i.e.* there were no constant drops in the number of members of any of the organizations. Two of them (nos. 1 and 4) recorded a continuing increase in respondents' membership. The number of members of UP maintained the same level in the sample of 1992 as in the previous years, and in 2000 there was a rise of 5%. It is also worth underlining that the rate of increase in all of the three above-mentioned organizations was going up, too. These are the organizations, of which one can speak about a long-term trend.

In the case of the other organizations, the level of farmers' activity fell between 1992 and 2000. However, the same organizations (except no. 11) increased their membership in 1992. It is not possible to note any clear tendency here and it is only by conducting more research in the future that we can clarify the situation in this respect.

Apart from the tendencies of changes in the years in which the research was carried out, it is worth observing the fact that in the case of three out of twelve rural self-governing organizations, none of the questioned farmers declared participation in their activities in 2000. This concerns nos. 3, 7 and 11. Similarly, none of the respondents indicated that they took part in village meetings.

Comparing the degree of farmers' involvement in the work of rural self-governing organizations in 1991 and 2000, it can be noticed that in all of the cases, with the exception of nos. 7 and 11, the level of participation was greater in the latter. As far as the first of these organizations is concerned, none of the respondents declared their membership in this organization either in 1991 or towards the end of the period examined. However, membership of it in 1992 amounted to 13%. This seems to be a problem related to the selection of the sample for the research or certain inconsistencies in farmers. The differences in the number of members of the other organization (Folk Sports Union) were smaller and the drop in the membership amounted to 1% in the year 2000.

One conclusion that can be drawn from the research conducted deals with the question of women's participation in rural self-governing organizations. Even though the number of members of CWC decreased by 2% in 2000 compared with 1992, at the same time in that year 4% of the respondents indicated membership of USCW. It can be inferred then that some of the members of the CWC became interested in the activity of the other union. In consequence, one can say there is a constant rise in the women's activity in the country.

The results of the research carried out proved that, despite the collapse in the idea of self-governing bodies in the period of the socio-economic transformation (the data collected in 1991 prove the truthfulness of this thesis), farmers have rediscovered the necessity of them. There followed a rise in their membership in the majority of organizations. One must acknowledge the fact, though, that with the generally sceptical approach to the evaluation of the functioning of self-governing organizations, it is possible to notice a dependence between the evaluation of the organizations and the effects of work of the farmers themselves: the lower the level of farmers' productivity (weaker, smaller and financially poorer farms), the less favorable the evaluation of the functioning of the organizations. Thus, there is a need for farmers' greater involvement in the activity of the organizations.

The respondents claimed that there was a marked improvement as regards fulfilling functions pertaining to training and agricultural counseling. This is made more significant by the fact that in the beginning of the 90s it was this very function that was pointed out to be vital yet neglected in farmers' opinions.

It can also be concluded, on the basis of the results of the research, that the process of adjusting to the conditions of a market economy has still been too slow. In relation to 1991, the following year saw a rise in farmers' participation in the activities of self-governing organizations. The results enabled making a fairly optimistic prognosis as far as the level of the organizations' activities is concerned. This, in turn, was supposed to entail a rise in farmers' activity within the organizations.

The research confirmed that farmers have a consciousness of a need for cooperation between self-governing organizations in villages and the authorities of the villages and communities. They also appear to be open to such potential cooperation. Farmers clearly stress the importance of particular functions fulfilled by local governments. At the same time they treat them as institutions through which they can realize their own aims.

Summing up, it can be stated that the research carried out in the Opole Province showed that self-governing organizations which function in the country are an integral part of the inhabitants' activities. Further-

more, the rise in the effectiveness of rural self-governing organizations seems to be a logical consequence of farmers acknowledging them to be institutions able to represent their own interests. They are also convinced to a greater and greater extent that they themselves have a real influence on the activities of the organizations. Certainly, this is a process which requires time. However, its impact on the functioning of rural self-governing organizations will definitely be incalculable.

Literature

- Kożuch, A., *Gospodarcze i społeczne funkcje organizacji rolników* (The economic and social functions of farmers' organizations), Siedlce, 1999.
- Krawczyk, A., et al., „Wiejskie organizacje samorządowe na Opolszczyźnie” („Rural self-government organizations in the Opole Region”), in: *Śląsk Opolski*, 2 (31), 1998.
- Samulak, T., „Ochotnicza Straż Pożarna jako zrzeszenie wielofunkcyjne. Sprawozdanie z konferencji” („Volunteer Fire Brigade as a multi-functional association. A report on the conference”), in: *Więś i Rolnictwo*, 1 (102), 1999.
- Sokołowska, S., *Organizacyjne i społeczne uwarunkowania wzrostu produktywności indywidualnych gospodarstw rolnych na przykładzie województwa opolskiego* (Organizational and social conditions for increasing the productivity of private farms on the example of the Opole province), Opole, 1989.
- Sokołowska, S., *Produktywność rolnictwa indywidualnego w okresie dochodzenia do gospodarki rynkowej* (Productivity of privately owned farms in the period of transformation to a market economy), Opole, 1994.