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## THE LEVEL OF TECHNICAL INFRASTRUCTURE IN THE OPOLE REGION AS A DETERMINANT OF THE DEVELOPMENT AND COMPETITIVENESS OF RURAL AREAS

### 1. Introduction

Developing and increasing the competitiveness of rural areas has become crucially important in recent years from the point of view of both environmental protection and making use of material resources. One of the important, if not most important, factors determining the level of local development is infrastructure [Parysek, 1997, 105]. The level of development of infrastructure not only influences the living standards of a given region, but is also an indicator of the level of economic development. Technical infrastructure of an appropriate form and level is one of the basic factors in attracting new investors, both domestic and foreign. This in turn determines the growth and development of economic activity in an area.

It should be added that the following are taken to be elements of the technical infrastructure: the road and transport network, the communication system, supply of water, gas and energy, as well as technical devices serving the shaping and protection of the natural environment [Drobek, 1999, 81].

The current importance of this subject, together with the increasing importance of the development of infrastructure induced the authors to attempt to indicate the influence of the level of infrastructure on the development of rural centres on the basis of changes that are taking place in the Opole *powiat*.<sup>1</sup> It is also pointed out that large towns and cities

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<sup>1</sup> A *powiat* is a local government unit with its centre commonly in a large town or city.

are characterised by a higher level of innovation than rural settlements. This means that large towns and cities play the role of chains introducing new solutions resulting from European Union programmes and regulations to the surrounding rural area.

The influence of technical infrastructure on the change in the number of business units in the countryside of the Opole *powiat* between 1995 and 2001 is also analysed. A business unit is defined to be an organisation involved in production or providing services in order to make a profit.<sup>2</sup>

The Opole *powiat* is the largest *powiat* in terms of area within the Opole *województwo*<sup>3</sup> with a surface area of 1 587 km<sup>2</sup> and is inhabited by 140,000 people. Including the municipality of the city of Opole, the surface area is 1 683 km<sup>2</sup> and the number of inhabitants approximately 270,000.

Within the boundaries of the administrative region of the Opole *powiat* there are three towns: Niemodlin (population of town and *gmina*<sup>4</sup> 14,027<sup>5</sup>), Ozimek (population of town and *gmina* 22,338), the municipality of the city of Opole (128,591), together with the following rural *gminas*: Chrzastowice (6,675), Dąbrowa (9,451), Dobrzeń Wielki (14,283), Komprachcice (11,080) Łubniana (9,483), Murów (6,258), Popielów (8,588), Prószków (10,058), Tarnów Opolski (10,520), Tułowice (5,597), Turawa (10,502)

## 2. The role of technical infrastructure as a factor of development in rural areas

Due to the complex nature of the theme, this article concentrates on an analysis of technical infrastructure based on such elements as gas and water supply and sewage systems (see Tables 1, 2, 3).

As can be seen from the data presented above, the best situation is found with regards to supplying residents and businesses with water. The water supply system is constantly being modernised and extended, and this is visible both in urban and rural areas. As a result the number of connections with residential buildings (in both rural and urban networks) is systematically increasing.

<sup>2</sup> Such activities include: production, construction, trade, service provision etc.

<sup>3</sup> A *województwo* (province) is the largest unit of local government in Poland.

<sup>4</sup> A *gmina* is the smallest of the three units of local government.

<sup>5</sup> The population figures come from the statistical records of the Opole *województwo* dated 31.12.2001

Table 1. Water supply and sewage systems in the Opole *powiat* (data from 31.12. 1995)

Government Unit	Length of network in km		Number of connections to residential buildings		Consumption of water from the supply system in residential buildings	
	water supply	sewage	Water supply	sewage	total in m <sup>3</sup>	per inhabitant in m <sup>3</sup>
Niemodlin	58.5	2.3	1032	34	206.0	29.2
inc. the town itself	18.7	9.7	494	75	348.7	50.1
Ozimek	65.9	8.8	1281	289	595.9	54.1
inc. the town itself	31.6	1.4	794	3	35.8	3.1
Chrzastowice	72.8	—	1693	—	186.0	28.2
Dąbrowa	72.9	—	1575	—	211.5	22.6
Dobrzeń Wielki	107.8	17.5	2244	254	214.6	15.3
Komprachcice	76.0	—	2226	—	152.5	13.9
Łubniany	44.6	—	822	—	50.8	5.3
Murów	34.9	1.2	783	15	76.6	11.7
Popielów	54.5	2.4	1055	20	88.1	10.1
Prószków	97.0	6.4	2004	65	272.3	26.9
Tarnów Opolski	96.1	3.8	2130	16	254.4	24.4
Tułowice	30.1	4.0	563	89	186.0	33.0
Turawa	55.1	3.2	1156	43	81.0	7.8
Opole	232.1	119.6	7743	3408	8719.4	66.8

\* in 1995 there were no data regarding the gas supply network

Source: Authors' own calculations based on statistical data from the government of the Opole *województwo*.

Table 2. Water supply and sewage systems in the Opole *powiat* (data from 31.12.1998)

Government Unit	Length of network in km		Number of connections to residential buildings		Consumption of water from the supply system in residential buildings		Length of gas network	Number of connections to residential buildings	Number of subscribers to the gas network
	water supply	sewage	water supply	sewage	Total in m <sup>3</sup>	Per inhabitant in m <sup>3</sup>			
<b>Opole <i>powiat</i></b>	1210.8	95.4	25661	1469	3279.2	23.5	37.3	907	4226
Niemodlin	114.1	12.4	2084	123	526.5	37.4	15.8	484	1741
<i>inc. the town itself</i>	19.1	10.1	661	89	314.6	44.9	15.8	484	1741
Ozimek	128.6	9.9	3028	307	638.4	28.3	5.9	157	1610
<i>inc. the town itself</i>	10.1	8.8	375	294	518.7	47.1	5.9	157	1610
Chrzastowice	72.8	—	1710	—	198.0	30.0	—	—	—
Dąbrowa	82.1	—	2118	—	205.4	21.9	—	—	—
Dobrzeń Wielki	130.3	32.1	2680	556	313.6	21.9	—	—	—
Komprachcice	78.1	—	2427	—	213.8	19.3	—	—	—
Łubniany	110.9	—	2053	—	119.0	12.4	—	—	—
Murów	56.8	8.2	1111	145	74.2	11.5	—	—	—
Popielów	122.9	2.4	2048	21	155.6	17.7	—	—	—
Prószków	97.4	19.0	2048	155	188.4	18.8	—	—	—
Tarnów Opolski	97.5	4.5	2163	17	282.9	26.9	3.8	26	20
Tułowice	32.0	4.0	599	104	243.8	43.0	11.8	240	855
Turawa	79.0	2.9	1592	41	119.6	11.5	—	—	—
Opole	245.3	138.7	77774	3526	7244.3	55.7	173.8	5129	38427

Source: Authors' own calculations based on statistical data from the government of the Opole *województwo*.

**Table 3.** Water supply and sewage systems in the Opole *powiat* (data from 31.12. 2001)

Government Unit	Length of network in km		Number of connections to residential buildings		Consumption of water from the supply system in residential buildings		Length of gas network	Number of connections to residential buildings	Number of subscribers to the gas network
	water supply	sewage	water supply	sewage	total in m <sup>3</sup>	per inhabitant in m <sup>3</sup>			
<b>Opole <i>powiat</i></b>	1250.2	214.7	27079	3726	3196.8	23.0	175.3	1013	4237
Niemodlin	114.4	13.7	2114	206	453.0	32.3	37.9	530	1744
<i>inc. the town itself</i>	19.1	10.6	677	162	257.8	37.5	17.5	530	1744
Ozimek	128.8	9.9	2999	307	599.8	26.8	11.8	172	1617
<i>inc. the town itself</i>	47.2	8.8	1279	294	361.5	33.7	7.2	172	1617
Chrzastowice	73.0	4.5	1926	108	163.6	24.5	3.7	—	—
Dąbrowa	82.8	—	2209	—	218.4	23.1	8.8	—	—
Dobrzeń Wielki	133.8	74.3	2857	1628	310.5	21.8	4.2	—	—
Komprachcice	80.4	—	2600	—	2360.6	21.3	10.3	—	—
Łubniany	117.7	—	2125	—	194.8	20.5	22.2	—	—
Murów	69.3	8.2	1154	145	81.8	13.0	7.8	—	—
Popielów	124.4	2.4	2084	47	181.1	20.9	—	—	—
Prószków	98.3	74.0	2135	631	231.2	22.9	12.7	—	—
Tarnów Opolski	98.6	9.4	2231	119	232.5	22.0	29.7	34	27
Tułowice	32.0	9.8	676	403	148.5	26.1	21.1	277	849
Turawa	105.0	8.5	1969	132	145.0	13.9	5.1	—	—
Opole	256.1	166.0	7976	4206	6104.8	47.4	243.3	5878	38230

Source: Authors' own calculations based on statistical data from the government of the Opole *województwo*.

Analysing the development of sewage networks, it can be seen that only a small improvement has been made as regards the length of such networks within the *powiat*. However, it should be added that these increases are tiny in comparison to the needs of the population. In some of the *gminas*, for example Chrzastowice, Komprachcice, Łubniany and Dąbrowa, there is almost no sanitary sewage system whatsoever, and instead there is a so-called "run-off" sewage system.<sup>6</sup>

The situation with respect to gas supply is somewhat similar. Apart from in the towns and *gminas* of Tarnów Opolski and Tułowice, no advance is being made. This situation has a negative influence on the attractiveness of the area to investors and on the comfort of the inhabitants, who are forced to have a cesspit (most often an old construction with a permeable base) and traditional means of central heating (coal powered).

On the basis of the state of technical infrastructure observed in these government units, one may define their strong and weak points, together with opportunities they possess and threats they face. This is illustrated in Table 4.<sup>7</sup>

**Table 4.** SWOT analysis of the state technical infrastructure observed in the government units

<p><b>Strong Points:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Energy supply</li> <li>- Large extent of the water supply network</li> </ul>	<p><b>Weak Points:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of a sewage system in the majority of villages and in some peripheral areas of towns</li> <li>- Small number of sewage refinery plants</li> <li>- Small extent of the gas supply system</li> </ul>
<p><b>Opportunities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Investments by local government</li> <li>- Making use of national and international institutions and co-operation with foreign partners to obtain funds for investments in local infrastructure</li> <li>- Training personnel involved in the building and exploitation of technical infrastructure</li> </ul>	<p><b>Threats</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- State policy restricting the level of investment made by local government</li> <li>- Legal and financial constraints in the field of local government economics</li> </ul>

Source: Author's own elaboration.

<sup>6</sup>In 2001 there were only 4.5 km of sewage network in Chrzastowice. In the other *gminas* mentioned the lengths of the networks were also very short.

<sup>7</sup> More information can be found at the following Internet site [www.powiatopolski.pl](http://www.powiatopolski.pl).

The extension of the technical infrastructure, especially of the sewage system and gas supply system, in each *gmina* would be an important element in improving the image of the Opole *powiat*. Such changes would lead both to an increase in the attractiveness of the *powiat* and an improvement in the state of the environment.

### 3. The role of the development of entrepreneurship in rural development

The changes occurring in the Polish economic system, except for the significant increase in unemployment, have resulted in many transformations, which have had a fundamental, positive influence on the image of rural and urban Poland to the outside world. Significant changes can be observed in the structure of employment, both in rural and in urban areas. The systematic increase in the level of employment in Sector III, the service sector, is clearly visible, especially against the background of employment reductions in many production firms and the liquidation or privatisation of state firms. Employment has been transferred from Sectors I and II to Sector III, since in this sector it is relatively easy to quickly find work by setting up one's own business, very often with the aid of relatives. The changes occurring now in social, economic and political life must be reflected in changes of the functional structure of towns and at all levels of local government.

Of all the *powiats* in the Opole *województwo*, the greatest number of businesses are registered in the Opole *powiat*. The most important and also largest of these include:

- The "Opole" power stations, the firm „Norgips" and the „Novistor" boatyard located in the Dobrzeń Wielki *gmina*,
- The firm "Opolwap" in Tarnów Opolski,
- The opencast mine extracting road building materials and the "Ekopol" brick factory in the Tułowice *gmina*,
- The carp farm with 600 ha. of breeding ponds and brick factory in Niemodlin.

At the end of 2001, there were a total of 8,352 corporations, independent organisations not possessing corporate status and individuals registered in the REGON files as carrying out business activities in the Opole *powiat*. Public sector firms in the recent past have accounted for approximately 4% of this number: in 1994 this proportion was 3.6%, in 1998 – 4.3% and in 2001 – 4.2%. The growth rate of the number of public businesses was greater than the growth rate of the number of private busi-

nesses (between 1994 and 2001 the number of public businesses grew by 91.7% and the number of private businesses by 63.5%).

The number of public and private businesses in the Opole *powiat* is presented in Table 5.

**Table 5.** Number of private and public businesses\* registered in the REGON files in the years 1994–2001

Government Unit	Total			Public sector			Private sector		
	1994	1998	2001	1994	1998	2001	1994	1998	2001
Opole <i>powiat</i>	5076	6613	8352	181	287	347	4895	6326	8005
Niemodlin	656	908	1229	27	24	65	629	884	1164
Ozimek	596	904	1189	25	44	50	571	860	1139
Chszastowice	251	304	390	5	17	20	246	287	370
Dąbrowa	364	445	596	15	21	23	349	424	573
Dobrzeń Wielki	578	763	898	15	28	30	563	735	868
Komprachcice	493	635	779	8	22	23	485	613	756
Łubniany	404	463	560	12	17	18	392	446	542
Murów	195	248	335	5	13	12	190	235	323
Popielów	329	375	463	14	18	13	315	357	450
Prószków	352	473	572	21	22	27	331	451	545
Tarnów Opolski	312	434	489	13	21	22	299	413	467
Tułowice	192	233	329	10	10	20	198	223	309
Turawa	354	428	523	11	30	24	343	398	499
The municipal- ity of the city of Opole		15 060	18 269		719	907		14 341	17 362

\* the data regard the number of corporations, independent organisations not possessing corporate status and individuals carrying out business activities.

Source: Authors' own calculations based on statistical data from the REGON files for the Opole *powiat*.

From the data presented in Table 5 it follows that the number of businesses in the Opole *powiat* is systematically growing. The largest number of businesses are registered in the political centre of the *powiat* – Opole.<sup>8</sup> A characteristic feature of this area is the increase in the num-

<sup>8</sup> Opole is the largest settlement in the *powiat* and the whole of the Opole *województwo*.



ber of public sector businesses. The following local government units are exceptions to this rule:

- Niemodlin, where the number of public sector businesses fell by around 11% between 1994 and 1998. However, between 1998 and 2001 a sharp increase in this number was noted (to 65)
- Murów, where the number of public sector businesses rose from 5 to 13 between 1994 and 1998. However, this number fell to 12 by 2001 (a fall of 7.7% in the period).

A similar situation to the one in Murów was observed in Popielów and Turawa. Between 1998 and 2001 the number of public sector businesses fell by 27.8% in Popielów and by 20% in Turawa.

A systematic rise in the number of private businesses has been noted in all of the local government units. Businesses run by individuals form the largest number of such businesses. Such firms are often small or medium-sized family enterprises.

This rise in the number of businesses can be observed in each government unit within the Opole *powiat*, and thus a rise can be observed in the number of private businesses in the Opole *powiat* as a whole.

A vitally important factor related to the functioning of businesses is their division according to sector. In order to analyse this, data from 1998 and 2001 are considered (see Tables 6 and 7).

The dominant sector of the economy in the Opole *powiat* is the service sector, understood in its wide meaning. Within the service sector the most rapid growth in the number of businesses between 1998 and 2001 occurred in the following fields:

- trade and repair services (27.7% of the number of businesses not including the city of Opole),
- construction (15.8%),
- industry (12.8%),
- real estate services and services to firms (12.6%).

Another characteristic of the Opole *powiat* is the high proportion of businesses which are private (approx. 95.85% of enterprises registered in the REGON files in 2001).

This phenomenon is unfavourable to the *powiat*, since trade cannot ensure full employment by itself and also limits the possibilities of setting up other enterprises in the service sector. R. Broszkiewicz [See Broszkiewicz, 1998, 49; Kuciński, 2000, 119] classifies businesses using the term "local markets" for this purpose and states that it is such markets that form the economic base of the functioning of a city, extending the city's influence beyond its administrative boundaries, the local area and even to other states. According to the classification system he

adopts, one can distinguish the following groups of organisations active within a city:

- enterprises in the field of communal services, housing, health and social services, schools and education, sport, tourism and recreation. Various attempts have been made in the past few years to privatise some areas of the public sector, such as waste collection, local transport, as well as schools,
- organs of local government (legislative and executive), whose role is to promote economic activity and entrepreneurship,
- financial institutions, banks, social security institutions, tax and treasury offices, leasing firms,
- organs of state administration with functions in the field of administration and law and order, sanitary and fire protection, as well as organs of specialist administration,
- households and the families functioning within them.

In the opinion of R. Broszkiewicz, stabilisation of legal and tax regulations, development of capital markets and improvement in the standard of living of citizens will all positively influence the development of the economic base. It is clear that as the economic base of a city widens and becomes more powerful, then that city becomes more powerful and stable.

At present, Polish policy in the field of rural development faces new challenges related to the inevitability of widening the economic base of rural areas. This means the introduction of non-agricultural sectors, the promotion of employment in such sectors, as well as supporting organisations providing services to the inhabitants of rural areas [Ciepielewska, 1997; Kłodziński, 1998]. The following are important factors in the economic development of rural areas [Kłodziński, 1998]:

- the diversification of the economic activities of farms and the promotion of local products,
- supporting the development of small and medium-sized enterprises in rural areas and the promotion of agro-tourism,
- employee training (mainly for management employees) in firms carrying out economic activities in rural areas,
- the development of rural infrastructure,
- protecting the natural resources of the rural environment.

At present, regional policies play a huge role in the field of agriculture and the market for agricultural produce. Such policies are aimed at (among other things) adapting the geographical layout of agricultural production to the quality of soil, climate, water supply, development of agricultural production in areas surrounding large settlements, as well as equalising the income of farmers living in different regions and lower-

**Table 6.** Number of businesses\* registered in the REGON files in1998 according to sector

Government Unit	Total	Agriculture, Fishing and Forestry	Industry	Construction	Trade and Repair Services	Hotels and restaurants	Transport, Storage and Communication	Financial Services	Real Estate Services and Services to Firms	Education	Health and Social Services	Other Activities
<b>Opole powiat</b>	<b>6613</b>	<b>337</b>	<b>931</b>	<b>1041</b>	<b>1957</b>	<b>223</b>	<b>456</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>700</b>	<b>127</b>	<b>252</b>	<b>382</b>
Niemodlin	908	58	88	105	340	26	81	12	102	17	28	47
<i>the town itself</i>	<i>592</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>50</i>	<i>63</i>	<i>235</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>50</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>77</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>23</i>	<i>39</i>
Ozimek	904	28	100	86	311	25	46	23	157	25	46	55
<i>the town itself</i>	<i>588</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>45</i>	<i>34</i>	<i>207</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>30</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>139</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>40</i>	<i>35</i>
Chrzastowice	304	18	60	41	88	12	21	6	24	7	9	15
Dąbrowa	445	15	48	99	130	20	34	10	43	8	15	21
Dobrzeń Wielki	763	30	108	136	213	20	58	15	94	8	35	44
Komprachcice	635	35	101	94	194	13	36	16	69	8	24	41
Łubniany	463	37	99	82	106	14	37	7	29	6	15	29
Murów	248	29	52	40	51	12	11	3	21	4	8	15
Popielów	375	28	50	86	112	9	28	5	15	11	12	17
Prószków	473	43	68	87	125	11	28	15	40	8	18	27
Tarnów Opolski	434	13	61	77	98	15	38	11	59	10	21	29
Tułowice	233	17	42	38	69	9	10	3	20	4	5	14
Turawa	428	26	54	70	120	37	28	7	27	11	16	28
City of Opole	15060	93	1225	1594	4689	323	1109	597	3663	244	567	898
Total inc. Opole	21673	430	2156	2635	6646	546	1565	730	4363	371	819	1280

\* the data regard the number of corporations, independent organisations not possessing corporate status and individuals carrying out business activities.

Source: Authors' own calculations based on statistical data from the REGON files for the Opole powiat.

**Table 7.** Number of businesses\* registered in the REGON files in 2001 according to sector

Government Unit	Total	Agriculture, Fishing and Forestry	Industry	Construction	Trade and Repair Services	Hotels and restaurants
<b>Opole powiat opolski</b>	<b>8352</b>	<b>431</b>	<b>1066</b>	<b>1320</b>	<b>2313</b>	<b>251</b>
Niemodlin	1229	77	95	132	407	32
<i>the town itself</i>	772	18	59	77	251	19
Ozimek	1189	33	142	124	350	43
<i>the town itself</i>	753	8	75	49	234	23
Chrzastowice	390	21	61	53	108	16
Dąbrowa	596	18	59	126	177	20
Dobrzeń Wielki	898	33	124	171	227	17
Komprachcice	779	34	93	116	251	16
Łubniany	560	39	104	115	120	14
Murów	335	32	61	56	69	9
Popielów	463	33	64	95	127	14
Prószków	572	44	76	105	146	17
Tarnów Opolski	489	16	56	94	109	17
Tułowice	329	21	54	44	94	10
Turawa	523	30	77	89	128	26
City of Opole	18269	134	1355	1797	5239	464
Total inc. Opole	26621	565	2421	3117	7552	715

\* the data regard the number of corporations, independent organisations not possessing corporate status and individuals carrying out business activities.

Source: Authors' own calculations based on statistical data from the REGON files for the Opole powiat.

ing expenses. Another important task is to prepare agriculture to "win" against the competition on the market for food distribution and supplying the grocery industry, supermarkets and government stores of agricultural produce [Michna, 1999]. In order to attain this goal, Polish firms must adapt their products to EU regulations and at the same time maintain their high quality and lower production costs. Also, farms must specialise. The further development of rural areas will be realised thanks to the investments of farmers themselves. Funds from the profits gained must be set aside, in order to invest in other areas of social and economic life, which leads to the creation of new jobs. According to the

Transport, Storage and Communication	Financial Services	Real Estate Services and Services to Firms	Public Administration and National Defence	Education	Health and Social Services	Other Activities
597	284	1050	101	153	292	492
121	35	212	8	20	32	56
71	23	168	3	14	23	43
51	64	219	9	30	47	77
31	45	173	3	23	40	49
31	8	36	11	10	16	19
45	17	65	9	13	18	29
65	23	128	7	15	36	52
46	35	84	10	9	29	56
46	14	45	5	5	20	33
18	10	38	8	4	10	20
38	14	24	7	8	14	25
34	22	52	10	11	24	31
48	12	67	6	8	18	38
18	16	32	5	7	10	18
36	14	48	6	13	18	38
1248	909	4684	84	330	885	1138
1845	1193	5734	185	483	1177	1630

data gathered by GUS (the state bureau of statistics) the dominant forms of economic activity in rural areas are:

- trading firms, often mobile,
- service firms where little investment is needed and qualifications are not important,
- simple home-based production and small production firms (crafts),
- small local firms e.g. building materials, saw mills, carpenters, food processing.

It should be added that initiatives aimed at developing entrepreneurship, especially in rural areas, should be supported by local, regional and state government. Preferential credit, subsidising the employment of

previously unemployed people and young graduates (of various disciplines) should be other means of promoting the setting up of new enterprises. Financial aid from the EU and various types of funds are also important in this field [Zawojka, 1998].

It should be added that any economic initiative in a rural area is faced with a series of problems, among which the following should be mentioned: the inadequate level of development of technical, social and cultural infrastructure, the low level of education and qualifications of the rural population, the extremely narrow economic base appearing in some regions of the country, low accessibility to services aiding the running of a business, the low level of economic activity and the high rate of unemployment [See Makarski, 1999].

The rapid speed of the present changes means that it is crucial to solve the problems considered here, which can be made possible by creating, for example, favourable conditions (of an economic, social and cultural nature) promoting the development of rural areas. As a result of this many farms now concentrate their activities on, for example, animal breeding (swine, cattle), adapt their farms to the needs of agro-tourism, look for solutions enabling them to obtain a reasonable income and increase the attractiveness of rural areas to domestic and foreign investors. The introduction of a series of incentives to increase one's professional qualifications is not without importance. The following should be mentioned in this respect: organising courses, training, as well as setting up agricultural advice centres.

#### 4. Summary

The trends observed at present in Poland necessitate the undertaking of a series of actions required to increase the attractiveness of rural areas and at the same time improve the living standards of their inhabitants. With respect to this, one of the most important preconditions for the development of rural areas is raising the level of technical infrastructure, which, in itself, will lead to increased economic activity in rural areas. It should be added that towns, which are centres connecting the countryside with higher levels of government and public administration, play an important role in developing the economic and social life of rural areas, not only in local and national relations, but also in making contacts of an international nature. Such actions have already been initiated in many *gminas* and *powiats* of the Opole province.

The setting up of enterprises providing recreation, both to the rural and urban population will aid the development of rural area. The following projects are examples of such activities: the opening of tennis courts,

together with facilities in Zawada near Opole and the repair and modernisation of the swimming pool in Suchy Bór.

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## I. Introduction

The land conversion issue has appeared at a time when Central and Eastern European governments have extended private control over land and shifted decision-making powers from central to local level. Since then, farmers have been able to decide on land sale or purchase independently (Swinnen et al., 1997). Most restrictions and difficulties related to land sales have been lifted. Moreover, local authorities have gained enhanced rights of self-government. The aim of the new system of local government in Poland is to satisfy the common needs of local society at a local level, to create a background for the rational and harmonised development of territorial units, and to provide a basis for balanced budgets. In this paper, we argue that decentralisation and extension of private control over land have led to an increase in agricultural land conversion in Poland, because farmers, local government and the rural economy as a whole all gain from the conversion of agricultural land to non-agricultural

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