

Urban and rural areas perspective in retail trade - Is the deepening of disparities in the core-periphery model irreversible?

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Subject classification codes: R110, R114, R580

The development of settlement structures is increasingly showing signs of progressive polarisation. On the one hand, the population, jobs, infrastructure, broadly understood services and trade are concentrated in several (a dozen or so) metropolitan centres and their immediate surroundings, while on the other hand, in other towns, and especially in rural areas, the population potential is declining, migration outflows are intensifying, and the social, economic, and technical infrastructure is depreciating (Copus 2001).

The surroundings of metropolises in Poland during recent decades experienced an uncontrolled expansion of urbanisation, characterised by a profound diversification of the land use structure accompanied by a dramatic increase in anthropopressure and occurs in a wide suburban zone, as well as in invasive forms of housing, commuting as well as services and retail in rural zones more loosely linked to larger urban centres. In the outer zones of urban agglomerations a deep transition in service patterns appears and massive structural change in local retail. Furthermore significant change in shopping behaviour and retail chains activities and locations became visible not only in distance and peripheral rural areas (Vias 2004, Paddison, Calderwood 2007), but also in small towns (Powe, Shaw 2004, Twardzik, Heffner 2019) and in wide suburban zones (Silhan, Kunc 2020).

In turn, restructuring and diversification of development structure, with a decrease in the intensity of spatial interactions, occurs most often in fully urbanised rural zones (often functioning as external parts of larger urban centres, Korcelli et al. 2012, Korcelli, Korcelli-Olejniczak 2017). The shortage of retail services in the rapidly growing suburbanisation zone is resulting in changes in shopping behaviour towards locations with chain stores. Network outlets appear singly even in relatively small rural localities, in municipal centres and small towns there are relatively often a few or more (Calvo-Porral, Levy-Mangin 2018). Retail shops in smaller rural settlements are disappearing, while their number is decreasing in small towns and community centres as well (Damurski, Ładysz, Zipser 2016, Kunc, Reichel, Novotna 2020). It is important to find the main commercial pull factors of the local shopping centres in order to attract potential customers as well as elements for improving the quality of life in urbanised rural areas.

Due to the interdependent nature of the relationship between changes in population distribution and flows (local peripherisation process and degradation of the commercial service system), the evolution of economic functions and transformations in infrastructure makes difficult to identify their succession in different types of rural areas in the outer zones of urban agglomerations ((Gibas, Heffner 2018). Changes in the distribution, nature and functioning of retail trade in rural areas, including suburbanisation zones of larger cities, are becoming one of the most important factors shaping their quality of life and development.

In large rural areas experiencing increasing marginalization, often accompanied by marginalization, access to services and trade, especially basic ones, is declining. The

shrinking network of local retail stores, growing competition from online services, and the spatial concentration of retail sales through supermarket chains, which locate their stores only in local or supra-local centres, are increasingly causing difficulties in the supply of basic products. Indirectly, this reduces the attractiveness of most rural areas and even small towns, both for rural residents and for newcomers. It also often becomes a barrier to the development of tourism, recreation, and leisure activities. In rural areas, there is a steady decline in the number of retail grocery stores, and the ongoing consolidation and spatial concentration of rural grocery stores and, more broadly, of all retail sales, reduces their accessibility. While the term “food desert” first appeared in the 1990s in a British context, several aspects had been tackled much earlier. Discussions on inequalities, social aspects and disadvantages of rural consumers originated in the 1960s (US) and 1970s (UK) (Wrigley, 2002). The problem affects not only residential areas in towns and cities, but (perhaps above all) also extensive rural areas, often peripheral in nature and varying in their scale (Neumeier, Kokorsch 2021, Bilková, Křižan 2015).

With reference to data published by various agencies involved in analysing changes in the structure of retail distribution in rural areas and small towns, almost one in four stores in Poland has disappeared over the decade of 2010-2020. This is a nationwide trend (i.e. Popławska 2021), and the situation is similar in regional scale – i.e. the Opolskie Voivodeship. In 2010, there were 8,300 retail outlets, but there are fewer than 7,000 actually (2025). Most of the stores that closed were located in rural areas or in the residential areas of towns and cities (neighborhood stores). In many cases, these were family businesses. If the owner of seven grocery stores had outlets mainly in small villages (e.g., Podlesie, Cisek), it has been more than five years since he closed his last store (Łany, Cisek). In the vast majority of regions store saturation has decreased. As a result, access to groceries and multipurpose stores is decreasing and becoming a disadvantage for rural areas and local residential neighbourhoods (i.e. Rodier, Durif, Ertz 2017, Twardzik, Heffner 2015). While the number of shops is declining rapidly, the average area of retail outlets has been increasing regularly for years. This is due to the fact that three or four small village shops are being replaced by sizable discount shops.

These types of shops are located exclusively in places with good transport links and a demographic potential of 3-5 thousand people within a radius of 5-7 km (referring to local Christaller systems), i.e. in small towns or villages characterised by relatively concentrated development. If it were not the case that they tend to be located outside the centre of such morphological structures, they could become elements that initiate or reinforce their formation. (i.e. Damurski, Ładysz, Zipser 2016, Dolega, Celińska-Janowicz 2015, Halás, Zuskáčová, 2013).

Insufficient or declining access to services and trade, especially basic trade, is increasingly becoming a reason for difficulties in the provision of basic products and the declining attractiveness of rural areas for rural residents as well as for the incoming population and often also for the development of the tourism and leisure function. On the one hand, there is a continuous decline in the number of retail food shops in rural areas. On the other hand, the continuous consolidation and spatial concentration of rural groceries and, more broadly, of all retailing, reduces their accessibility. Rural residents are increasingly dependent on car transport and often do their daily shopping on their way to work. Elderly and disabled people are often forced to rely on other residents for help with shopping. In rural areas where the population has fallen below 300 persons and the settlement structure is

scattered, there is usually no grocery store, let alone other types of shops. Until now, researchers have paid little attention to how unfavourable spatial conditions in rural peripheries affect the daily lives of individual residents and what mechanisms they use to cope with these limitations (these include daily access to groceries, general stores, and the most basic services). Furthermore, previous studies have not sufficiently taken into account the housing context of rural peripheries (i.e. Keim-Klärner et al. 2021, Bernard 2018, Paddison, Calderwood 2007). Serious difficulties with any change of residence stabilise the inhabitants of rural peripheries in an environment that causes and reinforces various forms of social disadvantage.

As a result, this is one of the important causes of gradual depopulation and the related economic, social and infrastructural disadvantages (Latocha et al. 2021). This increasing restriction of access to both services and trade located externally (transport and communication accessibility) and the decreasing offer of trade located in individual villages is setting in motion processes of marginalisation in many rural regions. This is one of the most crucial factors significantly reducing the quality of life in rural areas.

An analysis of several case studies representing the different types of villages and various building structures was also used. The article uses also a multivariate analysis of changes in the distribution and intensity of commerce in selected peripheral and marginalizing areas in Poland to assess the scope and significance of these processes in the context of greater cohesion of development processes.

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