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Conceptualising the Rise of the Rural Community Movement in Lithuania: A Framework for Analysis

Abstract

This paper develops a framework for analysing the process of rural community development and institutionalisation in Lithuania. The first communal groups were established in rural Lithuania in the late 1990s. Over the last decade the number of such organisations in the country increased to 1,400. Although a very positive development, rapidly growing grass-roots activism has often led to a complex process of cooperation, conflict, competition and negotiation among the newly-created community groups and existing state agencies, non-governmental organisations, political parties, and various rural and urban interests. The model identifies four arenas of contention and negotiation, in which the newly-created communal groups have attempted to claim legitimacy and define their role in the social, economic and political life of the country: the public sphere, formalised (state financed and delivered) culture, social

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services' provision, and commercial (profitable) activities. Strategies of rural activists and their effectiveness in each of the four arenas of institutionalisation are examined. The contributions, as well as weaknesses, of the rural community development in promoting rural development in Lithuania are discussed.

Keywords: rural development, rural community organisations, institutional changes, communal organising.

Introduction

Among European Union (EU) members Lithuania belongs to a group of countries (together with Latvia, Romania, Bulgaria and Poland) with a relatively large rural population. In 2009 about one-third of the total population of 3.35 million lived in rural areas (Statistikos Departamentas 2010). There were 21.5 thousand villages in Lithuania, the majority of which (66.7%) were small settlements with 50 residents or less (Statistikos Departamentas 2002: 56).

Over the last decade Lithuania has experienced a rapid growth of the rural community development movement. Whereas in the late 1990s only a few groups were known to be operating in the country, by the late 2000s their number had increased to 1,400 (Poviliunas 2007: 165). The rise of the rural community movement can be interpreted as one of the responses to the post-socialist crisis in agriculture as well as a strategy in dealing with growing economic, political and social marginalisation of the rural population in Lithuania. The crisis was produced, in part, by radical neo-liberal agricultural reforms implemented in Lithuania during the early 1990s. The abolition of collective farms and the attempt to substitute them with small-scale private farms led to a large-scale displacement of the rural population from commodity agriculture, excessive land fragmentation, a decline in productivity, and a growth in subsistence farming. Agricultural productivity dropped to 1952/53 levels. By 1993 only one in three newly created farms had a tractor, and one in five – a horse (Pekauskaite 1993). Rural unemployment and poverty soared. In some economically depressed rural areas official unemployment was as high as 17–21% (Statistikos Departamentas 2002: 34–35), while rural rates of poverty increased to 28.2%, almost triple the poverty rate in urban areas (National Social Committee of Lithuania 2000: 15).

By the late 1990s the decline of agriculture and pauperisation of rural areas led to the political mobilisation of various rural constituencies. Among them rural community development groups were most prominent. These organisations typically involved between 5 and 10 core activists organised to mobilise local communities to tackle pressing social, cultural, political and economic problems. An important feature of the rural community movement was that it represented a large and growing segment of the population displaced from commercial agriculture by post-socialist reforms. Thus, the recent wave of rural grass-roots activism can be interpreted as a sign of the formation of a new and self-conscious rural actor in post-independence Lithuania (Juska et al. 2005a).

Concomitant to the rise in rural grass-roots activism there has been an increase in studies analysing this new and important development in Lithuania, as well as in other countries in the region. Most of these studies have focused on examining the factors that contributed to or inhibited rural grassroots activism, such as rural and agricultural reforms (Alanen 2002; Juska et al. 2005a; Poviliunas 2003; 2007), the impact of international NGOs and donors in promoting rural civic activism (Mendelson and Glenn 2002), and EU programmes directed at rural development and democracy assistance in the region (PHARE and LEADER+) (Kovach 2000). There have also been ethnographic studies analysing rural experiences of organising in the region (Juska et al. 2005b; Karwacki 2002; Walsh 2007) as well as studies of the organisational structures and resources of rural community organisations (Edwards et al. 2009; Juska et al. 2008).

In this paper we expand the focus of analysis from rural community organisations to examine the broader process of rural movement development and institutionalisation in Lithuania. More specifically, we argue that rapidly growing grass-roots activism has led to a complex process of cooperation, conflict, competition and negotiation among the newly created community groups and the existing state agencies, non-governmental organisations, political parties, and various rural and urban interests. The purpose of this interaction was to institutionalise, i.e., to define and codify formally as well as informally community groups' legal, political, economic and symbolic role in rural life. Thus, community organisations have sought to identify and claim their share of resources and spheres of competencies and responsibilities in the social, economic and political lives of villages as well as to define their relationships with local government, cultural, religious and other institutions.

Furthermore, the process of rural community movement institutionalisation was and continues to be significantly influenced by EU rural and agricultural policies as they mandate various forms of civic and social partnerships in order for the national government and local authorities to access EU funding.

For the purpose of analysis we differentiate between two levels of the process of institutionalisation of rural community movement: institutional and organisational (Table 1). Following D. North we interpret institutions as *the rules of the game in society or, more formally, (are) the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction. [Institutions are constituted by] conventions, codes of conduct, and norms of behaviour to statute law, and common law, and contracts between individuals [and organisations] with the purpose of reducing uncertainty by establishing a stable (but not necessarily efficient) structure to human interaction. [...] In consequence they structure incentives in human exchange, whether political, social, or economic* (North 1990: 3–5).

In comparison, organisations listed in Table 1 include political bodies (ministries of agriculture, social protection and labour, and agriculture; local municipalities, regulatory agencies), economic bodies (agro-food corporations, cooperatives, newspapers, TV channels, etc.), and social bodies (rural community groups, churches, clubs). They are groups of people organised to achieve some common purpose.

In addition, we subdivide the process of institutionalisation of the rural community movement into four closely-related, but nonetheless distinctive stages or fields, each representing a particular institutional realm with different sets of actors, rules and regulations: (1) the public sphere, (2) formalised (state financed and delivered) culture, (3) social services' provision, and (4) commercial (for profit) activities (see Table 1). Institutional realms are identified following Bourdieu's notion of 'field' as arenas where actors and their social positions are located. Especially important in this respect is Bourdieu's insistence that each field is structured by power relationships (vertical as well as horizontal) where the struggle between a variety of actors for the appropriation of various forms of capital (social, cultural, financial) occurs (Bourdieu 1984: 226–256).

Table 1: Institutionalisation of the Rural Community Movement in Lithuania: fields, organisations, and dimensions of analysis

<i>Diachronic dimension</i> (institutional/organisational change through time) →	
←	→
Institutional level	<p>1. Public sphere</p> <p>Discourses on rurality in mass media, politics, and culture articulated by national/international government agencies and NGOs, political parties, intellectuals, and various urban and rural interests.</p> <p>Recognition/inclusion of rural groups as legitimate representatives of rural civil society; rural groups as spokespersons for the rural civic society</p>
Community group/organisation level	<p>2. Formalised (state) culture</p> <p>Centralised, top-down oriented framework of cultural provision constituted by the Culture Ministry, local municipalities, and the country-wide network of rural cultural houses.</p> <p>Creation of inclusive framework of cultural activities allowing broad public participation</p> <p>Voluntary organisations; formation of networks of voluntary community organisations</p> <p>Consolidation and organisational development of voluntary groups; inclusive communal cultural and educational activities</p> <p>From state sanctioned and delivered culture towards generative and participatory culture</p>
	<p>3. Provision of social services</p> <p>Centralised provision of social services through the Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, local social welfare offices, and local municipalities.</p> <p>Creation of non-profit, community based social services delivery infrastructure</p> <p>Non-profit organisations; development of networks of rural organisations;</p> <p>Transformation from voluntary to non-profit organisations; development of new organisational competencies and certification/formalisation of new status; participation in tendering process and delivery of services to clients</p> <p>From centralised/state delivered social services towards plural welfare model which includes communal social services provisions</p>
	<p>4. Commercial activities</p> <p>Oligopoly market in agro-food commodities (growing dominance of few large corporations and enterprises)</p> <p>Creation of a demand/market for plural forms of rural enterprises including ones based on social entrepreneurship and commoditisation of environmental and cultural capital</p> <p>Profit seeking organisations based on diverse forms of capital</p> <p>Transformation from non-profit into profit seeking organisations; development of new organisational competencies and certification/ formalisation of their new status; establishment of alternative food networks and artisan production lines/products, small alternative farmers markets, cooperatives, credit unions, etc.</p> <p>From productivist (commercial agriculture) based rurality to rural development</p>

Synchronic dimension: external/internal to organisations opportunities and constraints; character of strategic interactions specific to each of four institutional fields

We will now briefly review the structure of each field identified above and describe the dynamics of strategic interactions specific to each of them. The public sphere constitutes the first field of our analysis (the third column from the left in Table 1). It consists of multiple competing discourses on rurality in the mass media, politics, and culture that are articulated by national/international government agencies and NGOs, political parties, intellectuals, and various urban and rural interests.

Rural discourses can be defined as systems of meaning that describe rural areas. Because discourses reveal and emphasize some aspects of social phenomena, while concealing others, they comprise a constitutive part of power relations in society. Depending on which definition of rurality prevails, some groups might gain dominance over socio-spatial relations in the countryside, while others might be relegated to a subordinate position with their interests neglected or ignored (Lind and Svendsen 2004: 80–81).

By entering the public sphere rural community groups were striving to be recognised and included in public debates on rural and other issues as legitimate representatives of rural civic society; in other words, they were trying to institutionalise their role as spokespeople for rural civic society. At the community group level, entry into the public sphere involved activities leading to the establishment of rural community organisations, the development of a group identity and agenda, recruitment strategies, and the enrolment of members. The formation and entry of any new social actor (such as the rural community movement) into the public sphere also involved the articulation of a discourse legitimising its presence and the position claimed, i.e. explanations as to why rural community groups are needed and why the interests that they claim to be representing could not be expressed by already existing rural organisations and institutions such as local municipalities, national parties, the local news media, church and other rural groups?

As already mentioned, rural community groups had as their social base and claimed to represent the rural population displaced from commercial agriculture; these were predominantly the rural poor and elderly, who in public discourses on rurality tend to be described as welfare dependents and the ‘undeserving poor’. Thus the emerging rural community movement attempted to challenge the stigmatising and marginalising discourses of rurality that endanger self-aware, inclusive and active rural communities in villages.

The second field in our scheme is constituted by a centralised, top-down oriented framework of cultural provision to rural areas, which includes the

Ministry of Culture, local municipalities, and the countrywide network of so-called Houses of Culture (hereinafter – HC; see below for their detailed description). This cultural infrastructure in Lithuania is typical of post-socialist countries in which Communist regimes for political and ideological reasons centralised and closely controlled cultural activities in rural areas. Since Soviet times and throughout the post-independence period the Ministry of Culture, in association with local municipalities, has continued to deliver through the network of culture houses a variety of cultural services to the rural population, such as supporting local amateur performers, organising concerts and exhibitions of local and national artists, as well as lectures and other educational and recreational activities. As the number and influence of rural community groups continued to grow, they often entered into conflict, competition and negotiations with the management of the culture houses, local municipalities and the Ministry of Culture about how and for what purposes the existing HC facilities should be used.

At the group level, rural community groups acting within the cultural field were engaged in mostly voluntary communal activities directed at strengthening local identity and community solidarity such as organising village beautification campaigns, local festivals and celebrations, as well as educating their members. Organisational strategies have also included developing networks of communal organisations enabling groups to share experiences, provide mutual support and engage in common activities. Finally, at the discourse level, the involvement of rural communal groups in cultural provision was marked by activists criticising the top-down state-delivered culture, which treated the rural population as a passive audience. Instead community groups called for the transformation of bureaucratised cultural services into a generated bottom-up, participatory rural culture.

The third field in our analysis is constituted by the centralised provision of social services. In Lithuania this is done through various programmes of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, local social welfare offices, as well as local municipalities (Ministry of Social Security and Labour of Lithuania 2009). Currently social services delivery in rural areas is characterised by its chronic underfunding. A variety of factors contribute to the poor quality and severe shortage of welfare provisions: underdeveloped infrastructure inherited from the Soviet era; a lack of properly trained social work specialists, which is compounded by their very low wages; a disproportionate concentration of the poor and elderly in rural areas with much higher levels of unemployment than in the cities; and high rates of migration of young people from rural areas to

big cities and other EU countries (Hitaite and Spirgiene 2007; Marcinkeviciute and Petrauskiene 2007). Hence the interest, especially by well-established rural community groups, in the delivery of non-profit services to the rural population since it could both improve social services and provide badly needed employment in villages.

At the group level, the delivery of social services was to transform voluntary community groups into non-profit organisations, which required formalisation of their new status: the development of new organisational competencies and certification, participation in the tendering process and delivery of services to clients. At the discourse level, communal groups attempted to justify their new role in social services delivery by claiming to achieve a reduction in costs, efficiency, and job creation in local communities.

The fourth and final field in our model is that of commercial activities. Currently the rural economy in Lithuania is characterised by two trends: a continuous decline in the importance of agriculture in the national economy and a rapid consolidation of rural farms leading to a growing dominance of large agricultural corporations within the agricultural sub-sector. Both these trends are contributing to decline in the agricultural labour force and disproportionate concentration of unemployment in rural areas. This raises the need for urgent diversification of rural economies. Therefore, rural community groups could be important in promoting an alternative to commodity agriculture businesses and enterprises including investment in and application of environmental and cultural capital.

At the group level this would mean the transformation of community organisations into various cooperative-based commercial entities engaged in the development of alternative food networks and artisan production lines/products, small alternative farmers' markets, rural tourism, crafts, and credit unions. At the discourse level the community-based cooperative movement could legitimise itself by calling for the transformation of productivist (commercial agriculture) based rurality, which benefits mostly large agro-food producers, to a broader notion of rural development encompassing the well-being of whole communities with a diversified rural economy.

One of the strengths of the conceptual model described in Table 1 is that it allows for the operationalisation of the process of institutionalisation of the rural community movement along two dimensions simultaneously: synchronic and diachronic. The diachronic dimension describes the institutional and organisational changes that are occurring over time (horizontal axis within the top row of Table 1). It assumes that, in general, rural community groups

have a sequence-based development trajectory: they begin as informal gatherings of activists, leading to the creation of voluntary groups. Most community organisations would continue to function as voluntary groups, however some, after a period of consolidation, might attempt to transform themselves into non-profit organisations. Once established, some non-profit organisations could continue to function in this capacity; other groups might fail and revert back to voluntary organisation status, while others could try to achieve one more re-organisation, this time into profit-seeking entities. Again, once established, some commercial entities could succeed in their business activities, while others may fail to generate enough revenue and revert back to non-profit, voluntary status, or may be dissolved altogether.

In comparison, the synchronic dimension (vertical axis cutting across Table 1 rows) describes the factors both internal and external to community organisations that influence or constrain their actions within each field, such as regional and national policies as well as the structure of community groups, their leadership, resources, professional expertise, conflicts and cohesion.

Such an open-ended analytical scheme allows to account for the plurality of institutionalisation strategies that different communal groups are pursuing: for example, some groups, especially in small villages, are typically engaged in only one of the fields, while more established groups can simultaneously engage in social services, the cultural infrastructure and profitable activities.

At the same time, our conceptualisation of rural community movement institutionalisation has significant limitations. Firstly, the proposed model remains mostly descriptive in character because it does not identify how or why four types of institutionalisation initiatives develop within the identified fields. Secondly, the framework is underdeveloped because it emphasizes the relative independence of the four institutional spheres and does not spell out how negotiations and conflicts in one field, for example, formalised (state) culture are related and impacted by dynamics of three other fields (public discourses, provision of social services and commercial activities). These are fundamental questions that require further extensive community research and theoretical reflection and are beyond the scope of a single paper.

The very purpose of the paper – to outline a framework for analysis of movement development and institutionalisation in rural Lithuania – to a large degree determined the data and methods we used. Therefore, we relied extensively on secondary data analysis to substantiate a heuristic potential of our model and to systematise the research data already available which in addition to academic publications also included information provided by the

Department of Statistics of Lithuania and the Lithuanian news media. We also drew on extensive personal experience and field data collected in rural Lithuania since the late 1990s. Both authors of the paper were directly involved in three representative rural community group surveys; two were conducted in 2004 (N=326 and N=237) and the third in 2008 (N=217). One of the authors of the paper was personally involved in organising the very first rural community development groups in Lithuania. Since then, numerous field trips to rural communities were undertaken that included participant observations and in-depth interviews with activists and group members. Finally, the training of rural community organisers at Vilnius University, in which one of the authors is currently involved, has also provided numerous insights into the dynamics of rural grass-roots activism in the country.

In the rest of the paper we will apply the conceptual scheme outlined above to an analysis of each of the four arenas or fields in which the struggle for the institutionalisation of the rural community movement is currently occurring. For this purpose we will describe the relationships among the major actors within the four fields identified and illustrate the dynamics of institutionalisation by focusing on the strategies used and the degree to which communal groups have succeeded (or failed) in the codification (formal and informal) of their roles in representing the rural civic society. We will conclude with a brief discussion of the impact that the emerging rural community movement is having on rural development in Lithuania.

Institutionalisation of the Rural Community Movement in the Public Sphere

The public sphere is constituted by the symbolic or discursive struggles occurring among political parties, government officials, newspapers, intellectuals, various business and interest groups, and rural constituencies over definitions of rurality. In Soviet times the state imposed and tightly controlled the official discourse on rurality. However, as a result of the radical neo-liberal reforms carried out in Lithuania in the early 1990s, new groups and actors began to emerge in the countryside struggling to compete, negotiate or impose particular definitions of rurality.

The ultimate goal of the state policy in dissolution of the *kolkhozy*, or collective farms, and land privatisation was to reconstitute rurality by promoting competitive agriculture with farmers, entrepreneurs, and

agricultural corporations as its major agents supported by state agencies, banks, business partners, and various EU programmes (Davis 1997; Maddock 1995). A productivist vision of rurality was also prevalent in the country's mass media, where villages were identified with agriculture, and the rural population with farmers, entrepreneurs and the agricultural labour force. For example, content analysis of the national newspaper "Valstieciu Laikrastis" ("The Peasant Gazette") with a predominantly rural readership showed that the most important categories used in the newspaper's coverage of rural affairs were agriculture, financial support, and the EU's SAPARD programme. The least covered topics were rural development, education, and unemployment (Poviliunas 2003: 23–26).

However, from the mid 1990s such a productivist vision of rurality began to clash with the bleak realities of rural areas: rapidly declining agriculture, and growing unemployment and poverty. In the national media the prevailing opinion was to attribute the failure of reforms in creating a competitive and viable class of farmers to the moral failings of the rural population. Thus, content analysis of articles on rural affairs in the major daily "Lietuvos Rytas" for 1991–2004 (N=3827) showed a particularly negative view of the rural population displaced from commercial agriculture because of (a) its supposed social and moral "degradation" and (b) dependence on social welfare (Juska 2007). By the late 1990s the country's news media and political discourses had stigmatised the non-agricultural rural population through the increasingly popular derogatory label of "the beats" – meaning a pauperised, backward and shiftless rural population unable to escape the grips of the inbred Soviet mentality and partake in hard work, initiative, creative thinking, and entrepreneurship.

In this respect, the rise of the rural community development movement since the late 1990s needs to be understood as an attempt by the population displaced from commercial agriculture to resist stigmatisation and redefine themselves, as well as rurality in general. Rural community groups attempted to generate a new sense of identity and provide a collective voice to villagers by rejecting the prevailing discourse on rural population as failed, demoralised and incapable farmers. Instead, the activists declared as their goal to create a self-aware, inclusive and active rural community of citizens. For example, in setting up one of the most successful Community Centres in Balninkai village (population 469) in Moletai County, Eastern Lithuania, participant research methodology of the Brazilian pedagogue and social activist, Paulo Freire, was used by activists to define common actions through the inclusion of the interests

and knowledge of disadvantaged individuals. Freirean methods were used in the civic education of the villagers fostering their awareness and competencies in using opportunities that liberal democracy provides for citizens (Juska et al. 2005b).

It is important to note that the early efforts of community organisers were supported by national and international development agencies and donors, such as the Baltic-American Foundation, the Danish Embassy, Soros Foundation and others that provided legitimacy to the new discourse on rural civil society. The institutionalisation of the rural community movement was also fostered by EU rural development programmes such as LEADER+, which provided direct support to rural community groups. The designation of rural community groups as one of the conduits for EU funding significantly speeded up the creation of new communal organisations and increased support for the movement from both local and national governments.

Most recently, the institutionalisation of the rural community movement within the public sphere proceeded further when Vilnius University established a programme to train 400 local community organisers or social entrepreneurs for rural areas. This programme provides professional credentials as well as legitimacy to spokespeople for the rural civic society, which is very important in shaping discourses on rurality in the country.

By the early 2000s the growing public visibility and legitimacy of rural communal groups as rural civic society representatives allowed activists to vigorously challenge the rural “moral decay” thesis prevalent in public discourses leading to its significant decline (Juska 2007: 249–251). Thus, the consolidating rural community movement, together with other civic groups and interests, was reshaping discourses on rurality in the country by emphasizing the well-being of rural communities and the multi-functionality of rural areas.

Institutionalisation of the Rural Community Movement in Formalised (State Financed and Delivered) Culture

During Soviet times, the provision of culture in rural Lithuania was centralised and closely controlled by the Communist regime. For this purpose the state created an institution – Houses of Culture – which were to compete with and replace the Catholic Church in organising and guiding the spiritual lives of individuals and communities. The ultimate goal of those Houses of Culture

was to mould the consciousness of the subjects of the socialist state into the 'new Soviet man,' who was supposed to completely submit to party leadership, cultivate a collectivistic ethos, repress individualism, and at the same time be educated, inquisitive and creative in implementing party directives and initiatives (White 1990).

By the late Soviet period there were 1,476 houses of culture effectively covering all rural areas in Lithuania (Statistikos Departamentas 1989). Facilities for rural HCs were built and run by collective farms (*kolkhozy*). They usually consisted of one or two buildings containing a library, an art exhibition hall, also used for ceremonies, public gatherings, performances, films and dances, as well as auxiliary rooms for hobby group meetings, rehearsals and musical instruments. *Kolkhozy* also hired between 4 and 10 staff and instructors to run the houses of culture. Financing for culture house activities was provided by the Ministry of Culture through local (municipal) Executive Boards. Local Executive Boards, in turn, made up and provided budgets (quite substantial for the time) to culture houses. About half of the culture house budget was assigned to pay staff salaries, and the rest to finance its activities such as pay for performances of touring artists, organise amateur concerts, art exhibitions, lectures, folk festivals, etc.

When the Lithuanian government in the early 1990s dissolved the *kolkhozy* and privatised their property, the number of culture houses financed by the state was reduced by over a third to 967 in 1997, with a significant number of their personnel being laid off (Statistikos Departamentas 1997). Our research has shown that by the late 1990s the former culture house personnel – being well educated and with good organisational skills – became actively engaged in the rural community development movement (Edwards et al. 2009). As former librarians, theatre, music and sports instructors, lecturers, and children activities' specialists took leadership positions in newly created community organisations, they attempted to reconstitute volunteer groups based on a modified rural culture house model, i.e. to engage in types of activities, in which they had experience and competence such as culture, leisure and sports. By 2004 over 90% of communal groups were engaged in organising leisure and cultural events for village residents (Juska et al. 2008: 111).

Thus in many villages a duopoly in the provision of culture evolved, with culture houses and community groups engaged in providing the same cultural services to rural populations. This inevitably led to competition, and in some cases, conflict between grass-roots activists and culture house personnel, as well as with municipalities and the Ministry of Culture over (a) HC infrastructure

(who owns the facilities?), (b) management of facilities and state funds that are allotted for HC operation (who runs the facilities and decides how the budget is spent?); and (c) content (what is practiced in culture houses?)

Initially the culture house personnel and their supervisory boards at the local municipalities tended to ignore the newly-created rural community groups and their requests to tailor HC activities to better suit their interests. In part this was because HC personnel were subordinated to and administered in a top-down manner by the Ministry of Culture and the county municipality therefore largely unaccountable to the local population. Thus, the 1999 survey of cultural needs of the rural population in two counties in South Central Lithuania showed a strong prevalence among HC personnel to consider themselves (as well as being considered by the majority of the rural population) as “the experts” on culture. Furthermore, HC activities tended to be mostly limited to the traditional annual cycle of events that included patriotic, religious, and folk celebrations and holidays (Poviliunas 2003: 19–23).

Such a pattern of cultural services was inherited from the Soviet era, although the calendar of holidays and celebrations was made appropriate to post-independence Lithuania. Thus, instead of October revolution day villagers were now celebrating the Day of Independence of Lithuania; the Soviet *subotnik*, a communal outdoor cleaning day, became a model for village beautification campaigns; regular lectures previously held in culture houses by Communist propaganda instructors became the model for adult education and training, etc. Some events, such as International Women’s Day, continue to be celebrated with very little change since the time the Communist regime established them.

Characteristically, culture house staff not only took responsibility for cultural activities in rural areas, but also assigned themselves the role of “watchdogs” of this particular notion of culture as it was embodied in the official calendar of celebrations. Any “bottom-up” initiatives of the rural population that could not be accommodated by the official calendar were considered either non-culture or even anti-culture as they threatened the prevailing patterns of cultural service provision set by the state.

Finding themselves ignored, some community groups got involved in highly-publicised conflicts with HC personnel. One example of this is the conflict between the community group and HC personnel in the aforementioned Balninkai village, where one of the authors of this paper conducted participant observation in 2004. By that time the Balninkai community, in cooperation with other community groups, had developed

a rural development plan for the county, which also envisioned the possibility of communal use of the culture house infrastructure. However, what the rural activists proposed could not easily be accommodated by the official rural culture calendar and the culture houses refused to cooperate.

The directors of the culture houses involved in conflict argued that because of shortages of funds, the so-called 'experiments' proposed by community groups would decrease the funding available to already planned 'official events', which, in turn, would inevitably 'degrade' rural culture. The sentiment was widespread among HC personnel that they were being 'attacked by the community groups', while at the same time the groups were 'receiving lots of foreign money' to fund their activities. For their part, community activists stressed the lack of professionalism and the 'kitsch' – imitational and rigid character of official cultural events- which continued to be reproduced virtually unchanged for decades, as well as the inability of culture houses to organise events that would include all members of the community.

It took the intervention of the county municipality to mediate and resolve the conflict. However, heated discussions among activists and HC personnel that followed were indicative of a growing role of community organisations in the culture field as they were the ones taking the lead in defining the future role of culture houses, and especially in stressing the importance of alternatives to a state-sanctioned rural culture, which is to be based on self-cultivation and improvement, education, and community building. In the end, the new role of community groups was institutionalised when the municipality formed a stakeholder group in Balninkai, which included the personnel of cultural houses and activists to serve on an advisory board for culture houses in planning and carrying out their activities.

Institutionalisation of Rural Community Development Groups in Delivery of Social Services

During Soviet times, social services delivery was an exclusive prerogative of the state. Furthermore, secular as well as religious volunteer organisations interested in provision of care to disadvantaged individuals in their communities were prohibited. There were ideological as well as political reasons for prohibition of social services delivery by voluntary organisations. Communist ideology ascribed the socialist state a role of the ultimate and all-powerful protector and provider for the Soviet people that did not need the help

of concerned individuals. At the same time, the Communist regime treated any non-governmental group activities unsanctioned and unsupervised by the state as a potential threat to its monopoly on political power.

With the re-establishment of Lithuania's statehood in 1991 all legal impediments to volunteerism were removed. However, throughout the 1990s engagement of the NGO sector in social services delivery remained limited. Our research showed that rural community groups had significant difficulties in providing help to the most vulnerable and needy in their communities. In part it was because there was very little collective experience or 'organisational memory' on how to provide social care. Thus civic institutional structure of welfare provision in rural areas needed to be established, specialisation and the division of labour among members of community organisations defined, contributions and inputs from state representatives and other rural institutions (such as churches and businesses) negotiated, certifications obtained, modes of accumulation of resources chosen, and subjective incentives for this type of community work increased, since most people still consider welfare delivery to be the almost exclusive prerogative of the state.

However, by the early 2000s the situation began to change rapidly. A survey conducted in 2004 indicated that 41% of rural community groups were engaged in the provision of social services; by 2008 this number increased to 47%. The increase in rural group engagement in social services was in part reflective of rapidly growing needs in this area as rural communities were afflicted with poverty and unemployment to a much higher degree than in the cities, while simultaneously having a less developed social infrastructure. Thus, in the early 2000s, 53% of the poor lived in rural areas, while the rural population comprised only one third of the population of the country (Ratkeviciene 2004: 79). Furthermore, rural areas were characterised by a faster aging population with 23% being 60 or older, while in the cities the proportion of the elderly was smaller – 19.3% (Statistikos Departamentas 2008: 15).

Communal provision of social services was also growing because of changing policies of the Lithuanian government intent on increasing NGO engagement in this area (Bertelsen and Zalmiene 2004). Welfare reforms of the late 1990s, supported by the international organisations such as the World Bank and the EU, decentralised welfare services by the increasing role of municipalities and made establishing community-based social services a priority (The World Bank 1999). The reforms also provided (although limited but growing) funding opportunities for community groups in this area. By

2008 the Ministry of Social Security and Labour established the Community Affairs Division with the goal of assisting local community organisations in increasing their role in the rural social economy.

By the mid 2000s some more established rural groups began exploring possibilities to transform themselves into non-profit social service organisations, mostly as a way of providing employment to rural areas. Illustrative in this respect is the experience of the above mentioned Balninkai community activists in creating a social services centre in the village. When in the early 2000s Balninkai activists began public discussions on converting the closed village kindergarten into a communal social services centre, they argued that the community group could provide care for the elderly and disabled, adult education and training cheaper and more effectively than the state agencies. This caused apprehension for the area's social workers who felt that their employment could be threatened if state funding for social services were redirected to the Balninkai community centre.

At the same time, in attempting to transform their centre into a non-profit organisation, Balninkai activists encountered numerous difficulties. Some of them were internal, such as lack of expertise and training and the need to professionalise and bureaucratise the community group. The organisation also needed to find its niche in the social services market. For this purpose the Balninkai community group initially explored a number of options for the centre, including establishing close contacts with the Lithuanian Association of the Blind and Visually Handicapped and was preparing plans to create rehabilitation facilities for the visually impaired in Balninkai. However, the activists' plans received little support from the municipality lacking funds for this type of NGO project and wary of capacities of the village activists to provide professional services as well as create a financially self-sustaining social services centre.

The breakthrough came in 2005 when the Netherlands embassy provided Balninkai with initial funds (80,000 Litas; 1Lt = €29) to design plans for converting the closed kindergarten into a centre for the elderly. With international funding, Balninkai actively lobbied the municipality which in 2008 provided an additional 150,000Lt for the centre for the elderly. Finally, in 2009 an additional 900,000Lt was designated to the Balninkai social services centre from the European Union rural development fund. The former kindergarten is currently in the last phase of being refitted into a facility for the elderly and is scheduled to open early in 2011.

The Balninkai centre remains one of the very few cases where significant progress was made in transforming a communal voluntary group into a non-profit organisation. We expect that favourable EU and national policies to the non-profit sector expansion will further stimulate its growth, although significant hurdles remain. Our research shows a wide variation in rural groups' initiative as well as support by the local municipalities across rural counties in establishing non-profit communal centres. It is because a recently passed Law on Social Services makes municipalities responsible for ensuring provision of social services on their territories (Radisauskiene and Zalimiene 2009). The Law requires that the services ought to be provided by personnel with corresponding educational and professional credentials, while municipalities are made responsible for monitoring the quality of services and the network of the organisations that provide them. It means that the creation of non-profit rural community centres will largely be dependent on the support communal organisations can expect from municipalities.

In addition, the establishment of community service centres will also be influenced by a wide variation in provision of the social services to the elderly, disabled, families and children at risk across counties. It would seem that the poorer counties with more population in need would be more interested in developing a strong network of non-profit communal service organisations. However, the poor counties are exactly those with the least resources available to support rural communal groups. This suggests that future viability of the rural community centres such as the one created in Balninkai will largely depend on the capacity of the national and EU rural development policies to reinforce local social entrepreneurship.

Institutionalisation of Rural Community Development Groups in the Economic (Profitable) Sphere

The recent boom in creation of rural community organisations raises an important question about possibilities of the new civic organisations to use accumulated social capital and trust in engaging in commercial activities. R. Putnam with co-authors (1993) in their influential study of civic society in Italy suggested that grass-roots organisations cannot only successfully transform themselves into commercial enterprises, but can also serve as a significant catalyst in regional economic development. Could it also hold true in Lithuania, especially taking into account that EU funded rural development

policies provide significant budgetary outlays to support diversification of non-agricultural activities in rural areas, such as the encouragement of rural tourism services, rural renewal and development?

Alas, currently available survey data suggests that the overwhelming majority of communal organisations do not engage in or perceive themselves engaging in commercial activities in the near future. Furthermore, in the last few years we registered a decrease in attempts by communal groups to institutionalise themselves as small business enterprises. Thus, if in 2004 about 35% of rural community organisations were planning to start profitable activities, by 2008 the number of organisations with such intentions had decreased to 24%.

According to our estimates about 10% of communal groups did participate in seminars, workshops and training sessions on commercialisation of traditional handicrafts by rural community centres, as well as on starting small businesses in rural areas. These educational and training activities were supported by local municipalities, the national government as well as EU financed LEADER+ programme. Business training and education did help to improve the rural infrastructure (by providing computers, internet connectivity, specialised literature, etc.) and educate the rural population, but as of yet failed to stimulate the creation of communal enterprises. This happened despite the fact that activists were keenly aware that in the long run the failure to stimulate the rural economy and create jobs could effectively seal the fate of their villages.

The failure to engage in as well as a decline in orientation towards communal business activities was also impacted by rapidly aging NGO membership and its predominantly female leadership. As Walsh (2007) demonstrated in her study on communal organising, rural women are reluctant to engage in business activities considering them to belong to the realm of male responsibilities. The adverse to commercial activities demographic and cultural dynamics is also confounded by the underdeveloped small business infrastructure in the country, difficulties in establishing viable marketing and distribution networks, and relatively little knowledge of existing demand and marketing know-how.

Despite the rather disappointing communal business organising record so far, there are few notable cases illustrating the successful use of experience accumulated in rural community organising to start rural businesses. These could be informative in pointing out to internal and external factors that could facilitate growth in rural commercial activities. Of importance here is the ability of rural entrepreneurs to build on rising ecological concerns among

the general public and associated with it (limited but growing, especially in big cities), criticism of industrialised agro-food production and super-market based distribution systems. For example, the leader of the Darguziai village community centre in Eastern Lithuania recently began the production of French type artisan cheeses. When cheeses produced in Darguziai were offered for tasting in a small café “Le Paris” in Vilnius, they proved to be quite popular among restaurant goers. This encouraged artisan bakers and organic farmers to join Darguziai cheese makers in supplying their products for “Le Paris” and other restaurants in Vilnius. Currently Darguziai based local food production and supply network is expanding with the area’s small farmers actively cooperating with local community centres.

Although the Darguziai success illustrates how collaboration of the rural community development centres can facilitate the formation of alternative networks of civic engagement in rural areas, more research needs to be done in investigating the overall impact of communal business activities on local rural organisations and rural civic society in general. For example, with commercial success the Darguziai community leadership began to disengage from communal activities and focus on running a full-time business. Thus the village community centre lost their most ambitious and capable members, although the latter did join the association of small and medium enterprises, farmers union, and became active in alternative food networks.

Conclusions

In this paper we outlined a framework to analyse the process of institutionalisation of the rapidly growing rural community movement in Lithuania. Four fields or arenas of institutionalisation were differentiated and analysed allowing to account for the plurality of strategies of institutionalisation pursued by different groups and compare their effectiveness across the fields.

More specifically, we argued that rural community groups were most successful in establishing themselves as representatives of rural civic society and in provision of cultural services to villages. Growing public visibility and prominence of the movement was, in part, facilitated by a favourable context of political opportunity that evolved in Lithuania during the late 1990s, especially the foreign donor support of rural NGOs and EU rural development initiatives such as the LEADER+ programme. At the same time, as experience of rural organisation in Balninkai village illustrated, strategies

and effective leadership of community organisations in mobilising rural constituencies were of crucial significance, searching and recruiting allies, securing funding and creating strategic links with other civic groups, local government officials, academics and foreign donors. As the movement grew in numbers and organisational strength, it became vocal in contesting anti-rural biases prevalent in the country's mass media leading to a noticeable decline in rural stereotyping and stigmatisation.

Success of communal groups in the delivery of cultural services can be explained, for the most part, by collective experience derived from the Soviet era and the expertise of activists many of whom themselves had previously worked for or run houses of culture. Hence the sophistication and effectiveness of criticisms directed at the rural state-delivered culture. In our opinion, the role of communal groups in the sphere of culture will only grow as they are currently becoming the centre of civic life in villages thus further sidelining the declining institution of culture house. Furthermore, the Ministry of Culture recently announced that it has begun working on plans to reform the culture houses so as to increase citizen input and participation. Therefore, rural community groups are well positioned to be actively engaged in shaping the process of cultural reforms and thus to increase their role in the civic lives of the villages.

In the third area of engagement – delivery of social services – rural community groups were significantly less effective. Although members of almost half of all the rural groups did engage in volunteer social services provision, very few attempted, and even fewer succeeded in transforming the community group into a non-profit organisation. The analysis of the Balninkai experience showed that the creation of a non-profit service organisation in the village was highly dependent on county level politics, and especially on the support of municipalities. But such support was hardly forthcoming because being underfunded, municipalities were very weary of assuming new budgetary, training and supervisory responsibilities associated with the establishment of social service centres. It was only when Balninkai received substantial EU funding that the municipality provided strong backing of the project for the village.

Finally, the engagement of community organisations in commercial activities remained the most underdeveloped. Furthermore, community groups were not increasing, but, on the contrary, scaling down their plans for business activities. We argued that demographic and cultural factors specific to rural areas as well as the weakness of small business and cooperative infrastructure

and support undermines efforts at rural entrepreneurship. One prospective area of rural enterprise might be associated with the rising environmental concerns and growing discontent with the industrialised agro-food system in the country. The leaders of the Darguziai communal centre proved to be quite successful in creating and expanding a niche of locally produced artisan foods. Nevertheless, success in transforming rural communal groups into non-profit and commercial organisations will depend not only on the skill and vision of their organisers. In the long run the viability of the rural community centres such as the ones created in Balninkai and Darguziai will depend, to a significant degree, on the capacity of the national and EU rural development policies to interact with and reinforce local rural (social and non-farming based) entrepreneurship.

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