

Full Length Research Paper

Quality of life in rural areas of Croatia: To stay or to leave?

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This paper presents the results of a research study on quality of life and migration intentions from Croatian rural areas. The goal of the study was to investigate the satisfaction of rural population with quality of life in their communities and to determine the decisive factors in resolving the dilemma: “to stay or to leave the rural area?” The research study was conducted using survey method on the sample of 914 respondents from Croatian rural areas (all 20 counties were included in the sample proportionally). The rural communities and respondents in the age group between 24 to 45 years were selected randomly. The study results indicate that the major hardships of rural life are of economic nature, lack of employment opportunities, inadequate choice of profession and lower income compared to a city. About 20% of the respondents are not satisfied with conditions of rural life and intend to leave. Further depopulation of Croatian rural areas may have unfavourable effects such as excessive urbanization of large cities, uneven development of Croatia and insufficient utilization of spatial, production and human resources.

Key words: Croatia, rural area, migration, quality of life.

INTRODUCTION

Mobility of population is a historic phenomenon which has different causes. Mobility has frequently been initiated by wars, natural disasters and recently, most frequently, by economic and social motives (Wertheimer-Baletić, 1999, 2003). Initially, the population migrates into closer areas. However, development of traffic services and accessibility of information results in migrations to more remote areas (Čizmić and Živić, 2005). Croatia has been witnessing a demographic polarization into attractive (population) and unattractive (depopulation) areas for a long period of time.

Historically, there were only limited improvements in conditions on farms and in economically underdeveloped areas. Today, rural development focuses on providing

equal opportunities for the rural population in income, living conditions, health care, safety and other goods and services (Cramer and Jensen, 1994).

Rural-urban migrations have recently been stirring quite an interest. Urban areas, such as the City of Zagreb, want to “restrict” an inflow of new population because of its limited absorption capacities (Bašić, 2003). The citizens of Zagreb, which contribute most to the national budget, believe that better results would be achieved by investment into the rural areas (Juračak et al., 2005). By advocating polycentric development and acting as good managers, they want better use of rural resources that should result in higher total output and stop the devastation and abandonment of natural and production resources (land, forest, farm structures, etc.). Economic growth and increase in standard of living in a rural area are conditions that has to be met if negative demographic changes (ageing of population, negative natural increase in population of particular areas) are to be stopped and

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Table 1. Population of the Republic of Croatia (1991 - 2001).

Population	1991		2001					
			Administrative criterion		OECD criterion		EU criterion	
	Number	(%)	Number	(%)	Number	(%)	Number	(%)
Rural	2,187,060	45.7	1,971,005	44.4	2,112,085	47.6	1,608,910	36.3
Urban	2,597,205	54.3	2,466,455	55.6	2,325,375	52.4	2,828,550	63.7
Total	4,784,265	100.0	4,437,460	100.0	4,437,460	100.0	4,437,460	100.0

Source: 1991 and 2001 Censuses by settlements, Central Bureau of Statistics, Croatia.

problems with employment opportunities resolved (Gelo and Akrap, 2003).

However, any consideration of the rural areas needs to include agriculture and related activities. Public policy is used to disperse population and change the economic growth pattern. Many believe that decentralization of population and business activities should result in increase in economic efficiency, improved social benefits and better communication in political processes. Crises the cities have been facing in resolving their social problems have caused revival of interest in rural development (Cramer and Jensen, 1994).

During last thirty years, Croatian population depending on agricultural resources and production has been decreasing. Agriculture, the major economic activity in Croatian rural areas, relies on farms which are on average, small in size, with inadequate machinery and equipment and unfavourable economic efficiency. In addition, age and education structure of farmers is also unfavourable, poorly developed market infrastructure, unresolved property market issues, undeveloped forms of business organization (including cooperatives) and the image of rural areas are lacking (Tanić, 1995).

This paper deals with quality of life in the Croatian rural areas based on the perceptions of respondents participating in the survey. The goal of this research is to investigate the level of satisfaction of rural population with the quality of life in rural areas and to determine major factors influencing the dilemma of whether to stay or to leave (migrate).

The survey was conducted in Croatian rural areas, which, according to the latest Census data, cover a territory of 47,940 km² with the population of 1,608,910 persons that is 36.4% of total population of the Republic of Croatia (2001 Census) (Table 1 and Figure 1).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research was conducted by means of a survey on a sample of 914 respondents from rural areas in all Croatian regions (Counties).

The sample selection was a three-step process. The first step was to exclude all settlements with more than 100 inhabitants per km². The second step was to determine quotas by counties. The number of surveys carried out in each county was determined on the basis of the share of rural population of that county in total rural population of Croatia. The third step was random selection of two local government units in each county and random selection of

three rural communities within these units. A proportionate number of surveys were carried out in each of these settlements.

The survey unit is a household and within this household one of its members was selected - a respondent - aged between 25 and 45 years. The households for survey (every other household) were selected on a random basis.

The rationale for this selection is that the respondents we wanted to include in this survey should be persons with developed system of values that is educated persons, with strong position about the work and other values in life and with capacity to give a sound judgment and qualified responses to survey questions. These are also the persons who are potential migrants and persons whose leaving the rural area could cause direct damage and large indirect damage which is difficult to measure (Hodžić, 2000). They belong to the best productive and reproductive social group, so their leaving would be a sign that living in a specific community lacks perspective and would decrease the existing small share of vital population with absorption capacity for ideas and processes encouraged by the local and national authorities and businesses.

The survey consisted of four parts: the assessment of living conditions was evaluated on a set of 13 statements and the respondents' task was to indicate their rating of a certain aspect of the quality of life in their community. The ratings ranged from 1 (unsatisfactory); 2 (satisfactory); 3 (good); 4 (very good) to 5 (excellent). A higher rating indicates a higher level of satisfaction with a specific characteristic of living in the rural area.

The second part of the survey deals with advantages and disadvantages of living in a rural area. This concept was measured with a set of 26 statements and the respondents' task was to indicate their degree of agreement with a particular statement. The scale ranged from 1 (fully disagree) to 5 (fully agree). Some of the statements were reverse coded so that a higher number always indicates a higher degree of agreement.

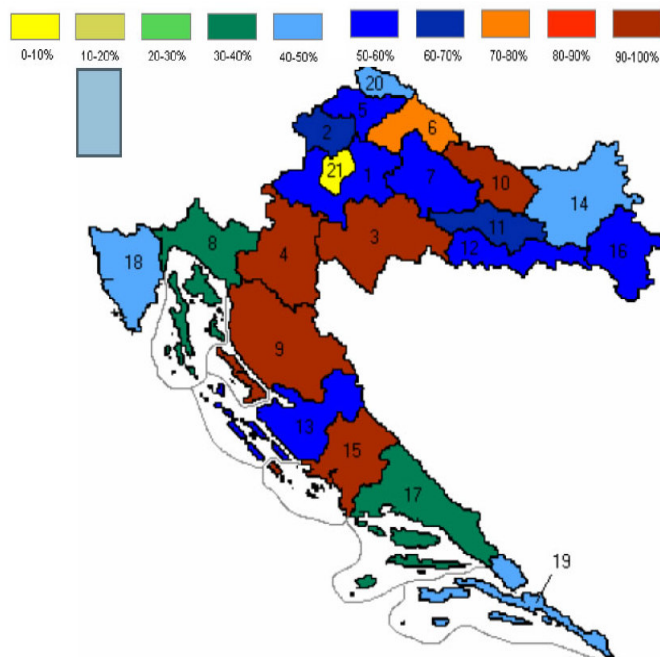
In the last two parts of the survey, respondents were asked to assess their overall satisfaction with life in a rural community and to indicate major problems of the community and major problems they personally encounter in their daily life. These were multiple-choice and open-ended questions.

In total, 941 persons were included in the sample. Average age of the respondents was 33.33 years and the sex structure was balanced (49.5% of male and 50.5% of female respondents). Regarding formal education, those who have finished secondary school was prevailing among the respondents (74.8%), while the lowest percent makes respondents with higher education (8.4%). Average number of members per household was 4.18.

The survey results were analyzed using the SPSS package (Statistical Package for Social Sciences, Version 13.0, 2004, SPSS Inc, Chicago, (IL) USA).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In making any evaluation, the respondents are generally facing a problem on how to objectively evaluate quality of



Counties: 1 = Zagreb County, 2 = Krapina-Zagorje, 3 = Sisak-Moslavina, 4 = Karlovac, 5 = Varaždin, 6 = Koprivnica-Krizevci, 7 = Bjelovar-Bilogora, 8 = Primorje and Gorski Kotar, 9 = Lika-Senj, 10 = Virovitica-Podravina, 11 = Požega-Slavonia, 12 = Brod-Posavina, 13 = Zadar, 14 = Osijek-Baranja, 15 = Šibenik-Knin, 16 = Vukovar-Srijem, 17 = Split-Dalmatia, 18 = Istria, 19 = Dubrovnik and Neretva, 20 = Medimurje, 21 = City of Zagreb

Source: Draft Rural Development Strategy for Croatia (UNFAO 2004)

Map 1. Share of rural population in Croatia by counties according to OECD criteria.

any phenomenon by applying their personal set of values and how to select a phenomenon/quality with which to compare his/her attitude. In this case, the respondents were asked to evaluate the living conditions in their respective communities and to make a concealed comparison with conditions that should be or that exist somewhere else (usually in a city).

The respondents participating in this survey take a rather critical view of quality of their living conditions and it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between objective critical attitude and the feeling that life is better somewhere else (Petak, 2002). The respondents presented with this set of questions unconsciously attempt to diminish some positive qualities in attempt to attract attention of the other party in a survey and encourage it to take steps towards improvement of the conditions.

Regardless of the mentioned limitations, the respondents expressed a view of many elements characterizing quality of life in their communities. Without considering of how an individual evaluation of the quality of life encourages the respondents to take action, the fact that the respondents think about leaving their community is a good landmark for action to be taken by a local

government and national administration (Lajić, 1992; Lajić et al., 2001).

Quality of living conditions in respondent's community

A decision on whether to stay or leave one's community is considerably affected by the respondent's perception of quality of life in the community. Broadly, there are two groups of factors for the migration, economic and non economic factors (Wertheimer-Baletić, 1999). In our research, respondents were offered a set of 13 statements and asked to evaluate the quality of life in their rural community.

From Table 2, the highest average rating was given to interpersonal relations, which were rated as very good (3.5 on a scale from 1 to 5, where 5 indicated the highest level of satisfaction).

Grocery supply, road connections and utility infrastructure were also rated as satisfactory. Rural areas are becoming ever closer to the urban centres, so the problem of traffic connections is becoming less important.

Table 2. Quality of living conditions in respondent's settlement community.

Question	No. of valid cases	Missing values	Mean	Mode	Std. Deviation	Range
Interpersonal (neighbourly) relations	928	13	3.51	4	1.07	4
Supply of groceries	936	5	2.77	4	1.24	4
Housing conditions (homes/houses and yards)	934	7	2.72	3	1.00	4
Traffic connections with municipality centre	934	7	2.70	3	1.14	4
Utility infrastructure	933	8	2.52	3	1.15	4
Health service (surgery, pharmacy)	932	9	2.20	1	1.24	4
Condition of public areas	934	7	2.16	1	1.06	4
Education	931	10	2.14	1	1.05	4
Financial and other services	934	7	2.04	1	1.11	4
Social services (kindergarten, infant nursery)	936	5	1.87	1	1.08	4
Employment opportunities	940	1	1.56	1	0.88	4
Profession/job selection possibility	936	5	1.46	1	0.76	4

Source: Survey of socio-economic factors of the mobility of population in the rural areas in Croatia and Town of Zagreb, January, 2007.

The respondents find road connections between their communities and municipal/urban centres good and this conclusion have already been reported by other authors (Gelo and Akrap, 2003).

Recently, increasing attention is paid to housing conditions and utility infrastructure in the rural areas and respondents rate them as satisfactory. Major steps have recently been taken to build adequate water supply, sewage, gas and telecommunications infrastructure and the outcome is shown in satisfactory evaluations of our respondents. However, a quarter of our sample still evaluates them as unsatisfactory.

Condition of public areas (town squares, parks and walkways) is also rated as satisfactory as much more attention is being placed into their construction and betterment.

Quality of social infrastructure

Overall, health care facilities, educational and financial services are evaluated by the respondents as marginally satisfactory. However, it is a warning sign that as many as 41.2% of the respondents find these services unsatisfactory. The age structure of rural population (higher share of elderly and vulnerable people left behind by the young who migrated to the cities) and their need for medical care are significant and compared with it health care services available in the neighbouring or large centres (Zagreb in particular), they are usually not adequate.

Educational services in rural areas usually include compulsory primary education and in most case some institutions of secondary education. Respondents evaluate availability of educational possibilities in rural areas as slightly above satisfactory.

Financial and other similar services (banks, cash machines, post offices, etc.) are becoming more available in rural areas, but there is still room for improved availability due to increased daily needs for these services.

One of major disadvantages of living in a rural area is unavailability of social services, such as kindergartens, infant nurseries, nursing homes, etc. More than half of respondents expressed their dissatisfaction with these services.

Employment opportunities

The other major disadvantage, as respondents in our sample see it, is the lack of employment opportunities and it is a major obstacle to their staying in rural communities. More than two thirds of respondents find that employment opportunities are unsatisfactory. This is one of the most important economic factors with the biggest pull-push effect (Wertheimer-Baletić, 1999).

Rural communities are commonly limited by a narrow array of career choices, which reflects on the selection of profession/job, as is confirmed by the respondents whose satisfaction with professional opportunities is very low.

Majority of respondents (70.5%) state that their incomes are lower compared to the one that could be earned in a city.

Living in a rural community

Two important issues arise from evaluation and comparison of advantages and disadvantages of living in rural community compared to living in a city: (1) what is the quality and objectivity of the respondent's evaluation of his/her community, and (2) what is the respondent's information about the life in the city?

The first issue, namely the evaluation, is affected by respondent's personal feeling of good and bad, which ultimately determines his/her future actions, including the desire to leave current place of living. "What is life in a city like?" Most respondents have had a chance to see and feel it because of the existing intensive migrations between rural and urban areas, and respondents from

Table 3. Advantages/Disadvantages of living in respondent's community compared to living in a city.

Question	No. of valid cases	Missing values	Mean	Mode	Std. deviation	Range
Lower living costs	929	12	3.19	4	1.28	4
Poorer housing conditions	930	11	3.35	3	1.13	4
Smaller social differences	927	14	3.59	4	1.02	4
Inadequate traffic services	929	12	3.76	4	1.08	4
Less stressful life	929	12	3.79	4	1.09	4
Inadequate utility services (water, gas, etc.)	928	13	3.81	4	1.07	4
Less privacy	924	17	3.83	4	1.06	4
Lower criminal, alcoholism, drug addiction rates	931	10	3.83	4	1.12	4
Lower income	930	11	3.89	4	1.01	4
Less relaxation	927	14	4.01	4	0.98	4
More conservative society	928	13	4.01	4	0.93	4
Less spare time	924	17	4.04	5	0.97	4
Closer relations with other people	927	14	4.05	4	0.90	4
More humane living environment	931	10	4.06	4	0.87	4
Stronger relations links	931	10	4.08	4	0.86	4
More influential church and intensive religious life	927	14	4.10	4	0.86	4
Healthy food	931	10	4.10	5	0.90	4
Higher personal security	932	9	4.12	4	0.84	4
Preservation of tradition	928	13	4.12	4	0.86	4
More physical work	929	12	4.16	5	0.91	4
Ample open space	928	13	4.16	4	0.78	4
Less opportunities for political and economic activities	928	13	4.17	5	0.97	4
Less opportunities for education and professional training	930	11	4.23	5	0.93	4
Less entertainment and cultural events	927	14	4.34	5	0.85	4
Lower environmental pollution	932	9	4.35	5	0.77	4
Better natural conditions and cohabitation with nature	933	8	4.39	5	0.72	4

Source: Survey of socio-economic factors of the mobility of population in the rural areas in Croatia and Town of Zagreb, January, 2007.

our target age group usually have someone living in the city with whom they stayed and had a chance to get at least an idea about the life in the city.

A decision on whether to stay or to leave, which is certainly considerably affected by luck, chance or other external factors, still primarily depends on a long-term personal evaluation, assessment and comparison of quality of life in a particular community. The disadvantages are usually evaluated and weighted higher than advantages.

In order to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of living in a rural area, respondents were offered to rate 26 statements using the Likert-type scale from 1 (fully disagree) to 5 (fully agree) (Table 3).

Statements used to assess advantages and disadvantages of rural life were phrased in both directions, reflecting positive and negative assertions about life in rural areas. Afterwards, all statements were coded in a way that a higher value on the scale represents a higher

degree of agreement with a particular statement.

Advantages of living in rural areas

Respondents are well aware that natural conditions and cohabitation with nature are better in their area. They also think that rural areas have less pollution, ample open spaces, healthier food and they generally agree that village offers more humane conditions of living compared with a city.

Other advantages of living in a rural area pointed out by respondents are related to social issues such as higher personal security and less crime, low stress environment, better interpersonal relations and closer neighbour relations. Smaller communities are frequently typical of their more intensive interpersonal relations between the persons living there, which is highlighted by the respondents as a significant advantage over the city (77.1%

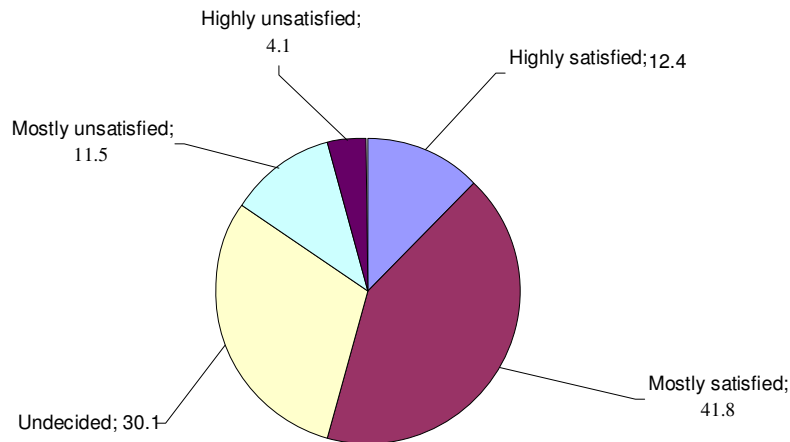


Figure 2. Satisfaction of respondents with life in their settlement (%).
Source: Survey of socio-economic factors of the mobility of population in the rural areas in Croatia and Town of Zagreb, January, 2007.

of the respondents agree and fully agree with this statement). They also think that rural areas preserve cultural traditions and have a richer range and importance of religious activities.

Disadvantages of living in rural areas

If compared to an urban area, major disadvantages of living in a rural community are: lack of entertainment and cultural events and fewer opportunities for economic, political and educational development. It is somewhat expected that rural areas provide less opportunities for personal advancement and usually young ambitious people need to leave in order to realize their ambitions.

Living in a rural area is frequently perceived as "working all daylong" unlike the life in the city and respondents agree with this concept to a high degree. This includes a higher proportion of physical work, usually related to agricultural activities. In relation to this argument, respondents feel they have less spare time and time for leisure and holidays.

Privacy in rural communities is limited by smaller population, smaller living space, close family ties, tradition and other factors. As much as 69.2% of respondents consider privacy in a rural community to be lower than in the city, which consequently can have an impact on some individuals. Also, rural areas are perceived as more conservative, which can be a deterring factor, especially for young people.

Finally, as it was stated earlier in the discussion, respondents generally perceive rural infrastructure to be less developed than the one in cities, despite recent improvements. About two thirds (68.2%) of respondents either agree or fully agree with the statement that income is lower in rural communities than in the city, but they also think that costs of living are significantly lower.

Motivation for leaving the community

In a way it is encouraging that a bit more than half of respondents are either satisfied or highly satisfied with their life in the rural community (54.2%). Respondents who are dissatisfied or highly dissatisfied with rural living account for 15.7% of the sample, while a high percentage (30.1%) are undecided. The undecided respondents probably have segments of life that are a source of satisfaction and others with which they are not satisfied. This is an indication that for a large number of rural population improvements of certain conditions can be a factor in making a decision to stay (Figure 2).

The results show that there is a significant difference in general satisfaction with life in their settlements among particular demographic and social groups and that is: 1. People who live as couples (regardless marriage) express less satisfaction with their lives (Pearson Chi-Square value 12.028, Asymp. sig 0.002); 2. Respondents from larger households, measured in number of members, are less satisfied (Pearson Chi-Square value 11.955, Asymp. sig 0.018); 3. Farmers are less satisfied compared to other groups according to occupation, while unemployed respondents are more satisfied or indifferent (Pearson Chi-Square value 17.442, Asymp. sig 0.002); 4. People with higher education showed less satisfaction compared to others, especially to those ones with secondary education who are indifferent or satisfied with their lives (Pearson Chi-Square value 9.660, Asymp. sig 0.047).

Level of satisfaction in all cases was constructed on scale from 1 to 3, where 1 is for "more or less satisfied", and 3 is for "more or less unsatisfied". Grade 2 is for indifferent, which means neither satisfied nor unsatisfied.

Regardless of their personal feeling of satisfaction, respondents were asked to pinpoint major problems of their communities in general.

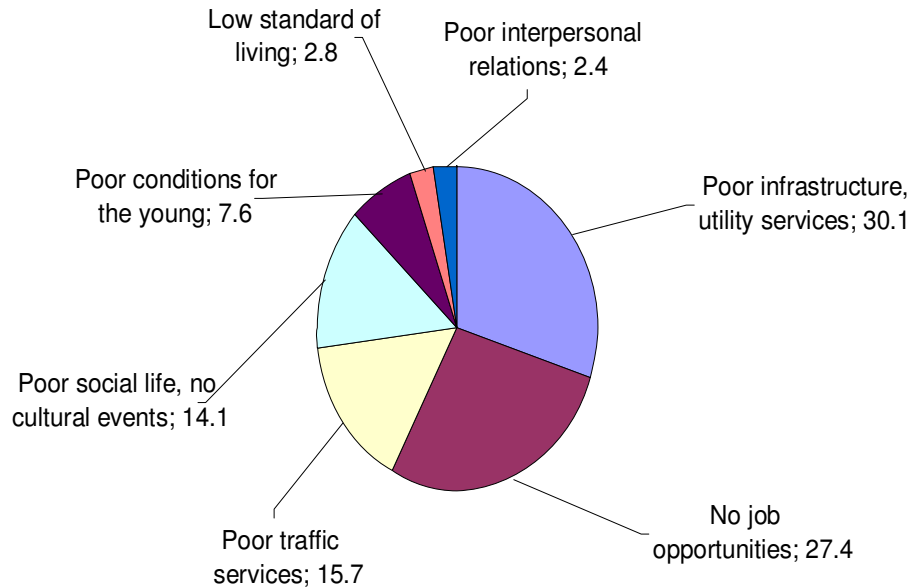


Figure 3. Major problems in the respondent's settlement (%).
Source: Survey of socio-economic factors of the mobility of population in the rural areas in Croatia and Town of Zagreb, January, 2007.

As it was already demonstrated in their personal opinions, the biggest problems of rural communities are infrastructure and inadequate utility services followed by lack of employment opportunities (Figure 3).

Intention to leave rural community

Faced with a direct question about the intention to leave the rural community, 19% of respondents that is 176 persons stated that they intend to leave their community. Most of them (59.1%) have still not made a final decision on the intended destination, 36.9% intend to leave and they have a specific city in mind, 2.3% would go abroad and 1.7% to some other village.

The reason for over one half (53%) of respondents for leaving is lack of job opportunities, for more than one third (38.9%) it is better living conditions in the city and the lowest share refer to education (5.4%) and interpersonal relations (2%) as their reasons for leaving.

The motivation of those respondents that have no intention of leaving their villages is mostly the general feeling of satisfaction with life in the rural community (29.4%), some (17.6%) do not want to leave because of the family farm they own (16.3%), and others because of their devotion to the birthplace/area (14.6%).

More detailed analysis of the results gave us some evidence of those social groups which are more inclined to leave the settlement. Answers to direct question about intention to leave cross tabulated with demographic and social variables, showed some interesting facts, and that is: 1. Higher age group (older respondents) are more in

favour of stay in their settlements (Pearson Chi-Square value 67.386, Asymp. sig 0.000); 2. People who live in couples (married or not married) are also more ready to stay (Pearson Chi-Square value 97.295, Asymp. sig 0.000); 3. Respondents with higher formal education are more inclined to leave the settlement ((Pearson Chi-Square value 14.941, Asymp. sig 0.001); 4. Regarding to present job or occupation, unemployed respondents are significantly more predisposed to leave (Pearson Chi-Square value 23.431, Asymp. sig 0.000).

There has been found significant difference among respondent groups according to general satisfaction with life when asked about intention to leave. More over, it is interesting that inclination to stay is more common to less satisfied respondents. That is to say that factors which influence feeling of satisfaction, and intention to leave, are pretty different. Those ones, who do not plan to move although not quite satisfied with their lives, are mainly tied to partner, family or to job in present place of living. Respondents which plan to move regardless their satisfaction found their reasons in seeking for employment, moving because of marriage and because of education.

As it has been expected according to previous researches, farming population showed more negative attitude towards quality of life and future prospects of their communities. We already mentioned that farmers expressed less satisfaction with life, but they are also more pessimistic about future than non-farmers (Pearson Chi-Square value 5.909, Asymp. sig 0.052). Even stronger than unemployed respondents, farmers have opinion that their lives in future will be worse than today.

Finally, respondents were asked to give their opinions as what should be done to decrease the number of people leaving rural areas for cities. Most respondents (57.1%) gave top priority to job opportunities, improvements in living conditions (14.3%), more favourable loans and support to agriculture (12.9%), a better social life (5.6%) and improved traffic services (4.2%).

The goals of this research were fully achieved as very useful information on the level of satisfaction of rural population with the quality of life in rural areas were collected and major factors influencing the dilemma of whether to stay or to leave (migrate) are outlined.

Conclusion

The study results indicate that the essential hardships of rural livelihood are related to economic issues such as lack of job opportunities, limited profession selection possibilities and lower income compared to the urban areas. The situation is additionally worsened by poor economic position of agriculture, which is clearly reflected in strongly expressed pessimism of active farmers.

The perception of quality of life in rural area is considerably affected by dissatisfaction of the respondents with social and health services and poorly developed infrastructure.

The respondents are aware of advantages of the rural compared to urban livelihood. The rural livelihood is life in natural setting, with less pollution, better social ties and less crime.

One fifth of the respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the conditions of living in rural area and intends to migrate. This is an alarming indicator, since the respondents fall into the age group between 25 and 45 years, the population which, as a rule, finished education and started a family.

The largest number of potential migrants is from the economically underdeveloped counties of Croatia and most of them are unemployed or farmers. Potential migrants find lack of job opportunities as the major disadvantage of living in the rural area.

Major advantages of living in a city, according to the respondents' opinion, are better employment opportunities and a possibility of earning additional income, as well as better chances for education and professional training.

Further depopulation of the Croatian rural area would have dramatic effects and the worst consequences would be excessive urbanization of large cities, further uneven development of Croatia, insufficient utilization of spatial, production and human resources and loss of traditional values. Experience gained during years of implementation of the regional development policy in the European Union offers examples of successful solutions

of the problems under consideration in this research study.

Exodus of rural population could only be prevented by increase in employment opportunities and income and development of infrastructure. The facts presented in this paper indicate the need for creation of a uniform regional development policy, since the situation in underdeveloped rural areas is dramatic. Depopulation of these areas needs to be stopped for economic, strategic and humane reasons and the key role is to be played by the state.

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