

The aim of the project is to identify the approaches taken by local authorities in response to the process of rural shrinking. Before this can be achieved, it is necessary to thoroughly examine the scale, dynamics, and spatial variation of this process in Poland. The research will enable an assessment of how prepared Polish local governments are to cope with the crisis resulting from depopulation. It will also facilitate the development of models that illustrate the actions of local authorities in the context of rural shrinking. These will be based on three elements: the awareness of decision-makers, strategic planning, and local policy practices. The analytical framework for decision-makers' responses has been developed based on previous research.

Currently, depopulation processes are extensively discussed in the international scientific literature, which introduces the concept of rural shrinking. It is important to differentiate between these two concepts – depopulation and shrinking. Although they are often used interchangeably, there is a certain difference between them, understanding of which is crucial for the proper interpretation of these phenomena. Shrinking is a more complex process than depopulation as it also considers changes in the economic structure.

The study consists of two main parts: the first involves identifying shrinking rural areas. For this purpose, the latest statistical data mainly from the Central Statistical Office will be utilised to determine which Polish rural and urban-rural municipalities are affected by shrinking and to what extent. Subsequently, a cluster analysis will be conducted to examine the variations in the characteristics of this process across different areas. The statistical analysis will be based on quantitative data covering two decades. The second part of the study will focus on identifying the models of action taken by local authorities in response to the shrinking process. Special attention will be given to the consequences of this process on local expenditure and investment. Field research will be conducted in selected municipalities, including an analysis of local documents (strategies, project implementation reports), interviews with local government representatives, and on-site observations.

The project is significant in terms of understanding the process of rural shrinking in Poland and taking appropriate action by local authorities. The harmonious development of rural areas is crucial for the socio-economic development of Poland. Moreover, in the face of growing disparities between central and peripheral regions, understanding and effectively responding to these issues is vital for maintaining social cohesion, political legitimacy, and democratic governance. This project will provide new knowledge and research findings that can be utilised by political and social decision-makers in shaping the development of rural areas. Furthermore, the research has an innovative character as it introduces the concept of “rural shrinking” into the Polish context, while previous studies have mainly focused on “shrinking cities”. The in-depth qualitative study of local decision-makers' responses to the shrinking problem is also innovative. It will provide a unique illustration of how local governments function in challenging conditions and attempt to understand their motivations, determinants, and the impact of specific local contexts