

## Hindrances to Social Cohesion in Lithuanian Society: The Picture of Rural Area in Post-Communist Period

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In the article, social economic problems of Lithuanian rural areas in the context of social cohesion are analyzed and possibilities of strengthening social cohesion through the involvement of social workers are discussed. First, the concept of social cohesion, its main constituents and indicators of measurement are overviewed. Further, peculiarities of Lithuanian countryside development, focusing on post-communist period, are presented. This period (1990-2010) was characterized by negative changes in rural population number and structure, such as fast aging of population, migration, decrease of economic potential of countryside, etc. Comparing with urban areas, the level of poverty and unemployment in rural areas is higher, and the accessibility of educational and health services is worse. These circumstances may be considered as hindrances to social cohesion of Lithuanian society. Further the development of social services and social work in Lithuanian countryside as measures for strengthening social cohesion are analyzed. It is argued that rural social, economic, and cultural environment and its population needs determine rural social workers' functions and competences. In the context of rural communities' development social work professionals by using their competence of communication and social networking and by applying empowerment approach seek to revive people's initiative and trust in their ability to make changes.

*Keywords:* social cohesion, rural area, socio-economic problems, post-communist Lithuania, the role of social worker

For the last 20 years after the reestablishment of independence in 1990, the Lithuanian society has undergone major political, economic, and social changes. Along with the collapse of the Soviet system the forcibly collectivized society has experienced centrifugal trends. Regained freedom revived the sense of personal autonomy and encouraged private initiative in the economic sphere. However, not all people succeeded in or dared to take their lives into their own hands after so many years of imposed social stability. As a result, the society has become highly diverse in income and social status, especially the regional (city and countryside)<sup>1</sup> differences of social and economic living conditions showed up. There are forecasts stating that in the nearest future many social and demographic development indicators will be worsening more in rural than in urbanized regions (Kuliešis & Pareigienė, 2011), thereby the rise of contrapositions

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<sup>1</sup> Of all the Lithuanian population, 33% live in the countryside. The settlement system consists of 103 cities and towns and 21 thousand of rural-type settlements ("Statistical Yearbook of Lithuania 2010", 2011).

between cities and countryside will increase. The lower employment level, higher number of people living in poverty, slower development of enterprises, poorer access to social services and other indicators among the rural population can be perceived as hindrances to consolidation of Lithuanian society, and social cohesion in general. That confirms the notion of Forrest and Kearns (2001, p. 2125) that nowadays many societies face the lack of social cohesion, which manifests in huge social inequality, weak relationships among community members, conflicts, and ambivalent moral values. In other words, social cohesion presupposes community consolidation, less social problems, and higher capacity for change integration (Wagner, Diaz, López, Collado, & Aldaz, 2002).

Lithuanian public opinion survey in 2012 produced unexpected results—70.4% of the population gave priority to economic well-being instead of political independence (“Spinter Tyrimai”, 2012). Such results demonstrate an emerging risk that this society may lose essential values which 20 years ago united the country and inspired to pursue political independence in spite of the threat of economic blockade and even the military intervention of the Soviet army.

Aiming at the avoidance of regional polarization of societies, the EU cohesion policy 2014-2020 emphasizes a place-based approach and empowerment policies toward social cohesion (Regional Policy—Inforegio, 2012). According to Knell and Srholec (2005), social cohesion was strongly related with the development level in the country. Green, Janmaat, and Cheng (2011, p. R19) identified at least three distinctive contemporary regimes of social cohesion: “liberal” (US, UK), “social market” (France, Germany, etc.), and “social democratic” (Nordic countries)—all of them experienced specific challenges in maintaining social cohesion. Whereas Lithuania as a post-communist country is ascribed to liberal/residual welfare type of capitalism (Aidukaite, 2004; Lelkes, 2000) and as other post-communist countries, it may be characterized by weak social cohesion (Knell & Srholec, 2005). Therefore, the EU regional policy tends to help member countries minimize regional disparities using mechanisms of structural support programs.

The concept of social cohesion, which is employed in this article “as a framework concept that has room for multiple dimensions of society’s problems” (“Social Cohesion”, 2010, p. 18), allows to highlight main socio-economic problems of the Lithuanian countryside in post-Soviet period and to discuss development of social services and social work as essential instruments in strengthening social cohesion.

## **Conceptualisation and Measurement of Social Cohesion**

### **Conceptualisation of Social Cohesion**

Social cohesion as a scientific construct is used in various disciplines: sociology, psychology, anthropology (Buckner, 1988). The emergence of the concept firstly pertains to Durkheim’s (1997) analysis of labour division in the society, which creates organic solidarity among society members, as well as to Tonnies’ (2001) community concept, which emphasizes not only territorial but also emotional affinity, the people’s wish to have interactions, feel mutual bondage, which is considered as a community base. In the contemporary scientific literature, the concept of social cohesion is widely used in works of various authors and understood differently: as a kind or an indicator of social capital (Jokubaitis & Norkus, 2006; Putnam, Leonardi, & Nanetti, 1993), a dynamic process of constant conflict and accommodation of groups and identities (Jaffe & Quark, 2006), a means of effective citizenship (Jaffe & Quark, 2006). Some authors defined social cohesion specifically as an indicator of community social organization level (Nieuwebeerta, McCall, Elffers, &

Wittebrood, 2008). Despite the absence of a general agreement on the concept, it is admitted that social cohesion is a prerequisite for well-being of society (Vasta, 2010; Nieuwbeerta et al., 2008) and is significantly determined by the level of trust among the population (Uslaner & Conley, 2003; Uslaner, 2004; Lægaard, 2010). According to Vasta (2010, p. 506), “cohesion and solidarity can be defined as social arrangements for how people with different characteristics and interests can live together peacefully and constructively”. Green et al. (2011, p. R6) argued that social cohesion was “the property by which whole societies, and the individuals within them, are bound together through the action of specific attitudes, behaviors, rules, and institutions which rely on consensus rather than pure coercion”.

Although the term of social cohesion generally has positive meaning and connotation which is further developed in this article, the other approach which emphasizes negative aspects of the term must also be mentioned. For instance, it is argued that social cohesion means far more than just “getting well together” (Vasta, 2010, p. 509). Taking it so, there is a risk to conceal existing and growing social inequalities, to elide social injustice, unequal power relations and assimilation tendencies which may be hidden under the term “social cohesion” (Vasta, 2010; Lægaard, 2010). In that case, the term might be used as a political strategy, as an invented reason to limit immigration, that is, diversification of the society (Lægaard, 2010).

Analysis of social cohesion in rural community encompasses not only social but also territorial cohesion, which means solidarity between cities and the countryside, a balanced development of regions. Differences in settlement structure, economic structure, features of social infrastructure and, accordingly, the ways of life are considered as factors of social segregation. Despite the development of the EU regional policy, differences between the city and the countryside remain high and there are no guidelines yet on how to overcome them (“EDORA”, 2008). As Uslaner (2004, p. 502) stated, “High levels of economic inequality tear apart the bonds that bind people in society together. As inequality increases, the belief that we have a shared fate—we are part of the same moral community—becomes untenable”.

Besides the above-mentioned factors, social cohesion is undermined by social immobility which “gradually erodes the belief in meritocracy and just rewards that is at the heart of the social contract, particularly in the liberal states” (Green et al., 2011, p. R8). This implies that social cohesion may be of “horizontal” as well as “vertical” form—understanding the latter as an opportunity for solidarity and mobility up or down the social ladder (Jaffe & Quark, 2006). This also means that the socially cohesive group may constitute an exclusive boundary leaving out those who were not so successful. Meanwhile, “a cohesive society works toward the well-being of all its members, creates a sense of belonging and fights against the marginalization of within and between different groups of societies” (“What Role”, 2011). Such pursuit of common well-being is an important prerequisite for trust among society members, which, according to Lægaard (2010, p. 462), “is a response to visible differences” and can be strongly undermined by inequality. As far as trust is an important indicator of social cohesion, social cohesion can never be fully understood without a focus on interaction between group members and mutual influence on each others’ membership attitudes and behaviors (Friedkin, 2004, p. 422).

In the face of social contrapositions, social cohesion takes the form of social policy, which strives to decrease social inequalities, create shared values, and reduce disparities in wealth and income, enabling people to independently solve their problems. At the EU policy level, social cohesion often relates to the elimination of inequality (Vergolini, 2001), integration of migrants in order to avert the decomposition of society (“Economic

Migration”, 2008). Empowerment policies that are going to affect social cohesion are significant issues.

Hence, social cohesion is a complex, multidimensional, and multilevel concept and its measurement implies a set of indicators of different types (Jaffe et al., 2006; Dickes, Valentova, & Borsenberger, 2011).

### **Measurement of Social Cohesion**

Multidimensional nature of the concept of social cohesion (Buckner, 1988; Wilkinson, 2007) requires pluralistic approach, many dimensions and ranks of indicators for its measurement. For instance, Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti (1993) suggested indicators of social solidarity and civic participation, such as civic engagement, political equality, solidarity, trust, tolerance, and associations (social structures of cooperation). Key measures of social cohesion presented by Green et al. (2011, p. R9) are similar: interpersonal or “social” (including political) trust which is an important precondition for the functioning of modern societies, tolerance, which is often considered to be a feature of highly cohesive societies, conflict, and which manifests the perceived level of tension between different social groups. In slightly different words of Læggaard (2010), social cohesion indicators were such as generalized political participation, the degree of involvement in associations and outsider-group hostility.

When measuring social cohesion, a considerable number of indicators are related to social capital as well as to horizontal (in society, rural or urban community) or vertical social cohesion (cohesion between the state and the citizens, between the rural and the urban) (Smith & Courtney, 2009). Or, otherwise, indicators for measurement of social cohesion could be divided into such groups as social capital, demographic stability, community and individual quality of life, social and economic inclusion (Duhaime, Searles, Usher, Myers, & Fréchette, 2004).

Social cohesion can be measured by aggregated and individual data (objective and perceived social cohesion). In the first case, it is approached as a part of social system and is measured at the macro-level, using such indicators as income level, inequality of income, level of education in society, incidence of social assistance benefits, criminality, unemployment rates, level of participation in NGOs (non-governmental organizations), etc. In the second case, social cohesion is measured by individual attitudes, evaluations, behaviour, social interaction, etc. (Vergolini, 2001).

Social cohesion can also be characterized at the group level. Social psychologists emphasize that one’s intentions to be a group member, loyalty to the group, etc. are very important indicators of social cohesion (Friedkin, 2004), because people usually do not want to identify themselves with persons living in poverty, having poor education, or being blamed by society. It can be presumed that in many cases communities, which are characterized by social vulnerability, high poverty or low education, will be less socially cohesive.

The summary of the overview presented above confirms the notion of Guibet Lafaye (2009) that the term “social cohesion” remains obscure and undefined. Pluralistic character of the concept allows analyzing it on the base of different theoretical approaches, covering various dimensions, and using many indicators at the macro- and micro-level.

In this article, the discussion about hindrances of social cohesion in Lithuanian countryside (which affect cohesion in society in general) will concentrate on the dimensions, which fall under the concepts of social exclusion and social capital. Consequently, the further analysis is based on such groups of indicators as demographic variables, migration, economic potential, income level, inequality and poverty, unemployment, health, and education. Instruments for enhancing social cohesion such as community movement, development

of infrastructure of social services, the role of social workers are also taken into account. Information and macro-level data presented by Lithuanian Statistics and various national researches will be referred to.

### **Preconditions for Social Cohesion in Lithuanian Countryside Since 1990**

#### **Definition of “Rural Area”**

In order to define “rural area”, various criterions are being used (Pizzoli & Xiaoning, 2007). Rural area characterizes a territorial unit with geographic and functional criteria and specific natural, social and ethno-cultural conditions as well as territorial settlement system. The term “rural area” encompasses a village as a dwelling place and the surrounding territorial space, related to performance of rural functions. A village or a rural settlement is identified with the level of settlement urbanization, agricultural activities, small number of inhabitants, landscape, natural and ethnographical heritage, ancient traditional crafts, and living style of people (Melnikienė, Vidickienė, Gedminaitė-Raudonė, & Ribašauskienė, 2011). Small towns, villages, and farmsteads as well as fields, meadows, pastures, forests, and ponds which are in the surrounding territory are attributed to rural settlements. Meanwhile for the purpose of estimating economic potential of a particular rural territory, it is necessary to refer to the more precise concept (for instance, see Dijkstra & Ruiz, 2010).

In this article, a rural area is understood as a territory (remote areas) with a low concentration of population, specific lifestyle based on communal relations, prevailing natural environment, landscape, infrastructural development peculiarities, and dominating agriculture activities (Vaitekūnas, Martinavičius, Misiūnas, Kabaila, Gruževskis, & Adlys, 2006).

#### **The Peculiarities of Lithuanian Rural Development During Post-Communist Period**

According to the peculiarities of agricultural production and settlement system, the history of Lithuanian rural development in the 20th-21st century could be divided into three periods: (1) Lithuanian independence before the World War II; (2) the Soviet period; and (3) the post-communist period which started in 1990, after the reestablishment of independence. The article concentrates on the third period, with a short introduction of the first two as pre-history to the current period.

Between 1922 and 1940, intrinsic elements among Lithuanian rural settlements and agriculture were small farmsteads. During the agrarian reform in the period of the Lithuanian independence before the World War II, each family received a separate piece of land. This caused a specific form of living style—a farmstead (“*vienkiemis*”, a farm as a single unit), which in many cases was located at a great distance from each other. In pre-war Lithuanian village private family farms prevailed and a system of 385 thousands farmsteads was formed (Rupas & Vaitiekūnas, 1980).

In 1940 when Lithuania lost its independence and became a part of the Soviet Union, private ownership of land was liquidated and the entrenchment of collective property and ideology began. Consequently, in 1947-1951 new economic agricultural units—“*kolkhozes*”—were established: several villages were merged to form 300-500 ha collective farms. In the Soviet period, a farmstead was considered as an obsolete form of a settlement and an obstacle to “a new life”; therefore, attempts were made to eliminate them (Rupas & Vaitiekūnas, 1980; Butkevičius, 1980). Until the end of 1953, during the implementation of soviet villages’ reconstruction plan, 98.9% of family-run farms were collectivized and soviet collective farms (*kolkhozes*) were constructed on their base. By 1980 over 40% of all farmsteads were already demolished in Lithuania, and in some rural areas they were all pulled down. The demolition of farmsteads was one of the measures to implant

the Soviet ideology in rural areas under the pretext of rural population welfare and agriculture production efficiency (Grabauskas & Labanauskaitė, 1980). As a result, old and authentic farms were ruined. People had to either join kolkhozes or change their place of residence. In this period Lithuania lost a large part of its ethnographic heritage. However, after the 1980s, the speed of farmstead deconstruction slowed down significantly and the residents of the remaining individual farms often sought to stay in their places.

In 1990 when Lithuania restored its independence and a new agrarian reform began, the land was returned to all its former owners and their descendants. The process of privatization increased the social stratification and contraposition of people living in rural areas. The privatization of social objects, closure of cultural centers and village kindergartens began (Žalimienė, 1994). Radical changes (due to the return of land to its former owners, demolition of “kolkhozes”, liberalization of economy, etc.) and lack of competence to adapt to these new circumstances caused many negative phenomena in the rural area: high unemployment rate, income differentiation, poverty, worsening access to education and health care, alcoholism, pessimistic feelings, and increasing distrust. Lack of preventive state policy and anticipatory planning of changes presupposed social exclusion and stigmatization of rural people (Atkočiūnienė, 2000; Atkočiūnienė et al., 2004). Instead of being perceived as preservers of national identity (as it was in the Soviet time), they became “leftovers” of the Soviet time, unable to adapt to modern challenges (Knudsen, 2010). Marginalized situation generated nostalgia for the “better soviet past”. Klumbyte (2009, p. 108) argued that “nostalgia is also a way to reclaim the ideal and moral self, as well as one’s status and dignity”. Besides, nostalgia represents a means by which marginalized villagers “reclaim visibility, voice their concerns, and appeal for... inclusive citizenship” (Klumbyte, 2009, p. 110). Thereby, nostalgia for the past might be considered as another sign of a weak social cohesion, which, moreover, deprives people from active participation in the present life in general. Paradoxically, the process of initial social deconstruction and weakening of mutual social supervision was to some extent healthful: despite the negative implications of this process, it encouraged the development of self-reliance and self-control, the need for inner regulation of behavior (Vosyliūtė, 2002). In general, the agricultural reform, transition from communal farming to priorities of individual farms has changed vectors of rural settlement that dominated before. Village people regained freedom to make decisions regarding their desirable living place and forms of employment. Responsibility for the development of rural social infrastructure switched from agricultural companies to municipalities.

### **Demographic Changes**

Demographic stability and growth of the population could be considered as a necessary element in measuring social cohesion (Duhaimė et al., 2004). In that sense, it could be argued that during the recent years, Lithuanian village has been experiencing the weakening of social cohesion: in the period of 1990-2011 rural population decreased by 10.4% (“Demographic Yearbook 2011”, 2012). Meanwhile, the recent forecast indicates that by 2020 the general number of rural economies, individuals employed in agriculture and the general number of rural population will have decreased by 40%. It has been calculated that in the future the demographic indicators of rural areas will drop not only in their total value, but also in comparison with equivalent measures of urban population. For instance, total index of birth rate in Lithuanian village has always been higher than in cities but it is forecasted that in 2013 its value in the city will for the first time exceed that in rural areas (respectively, 1.58 in the village and 1.60 in the city). Whereas the forecasted index of ageing<sup>2</sup> in

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<sup>2</sup> Index of ageing: number of people aged over 60 years old to 100 children below 15 years old.

2013 will be 150 in rural areas compared to 146 in urban regions (Kuliešis & Pareigienė, 2011). Furthermore, it has to be taken into account that demographic changes in the rural area are affected by the processes of migration.

### **Migration**

Since 1990 about 9% of population emigrated from Lithuania, and through the last decade (2001-2010) the overall of 204.7 thousand people left to foreign countries (“Demographic Yearbook 2011”, 2012). A remarkable feature of the first decade after 1990 was the fact that external emigration from cities was much more intensive than that from rural areas, while migration from rural settlements particularly increased after 2009. Nowadays it has to be acknowledged that indicators of both internal and external migration are less favorable to the village. Since the year of 2000, the internal migration direction from rural to urban areas prevails and this trend is especially evident in the period of the economic crisis (“Demographic Yearbook 2011”, 2012; Kuliešis & Pareigienė, 2011). Since it is mostly younger people who leave from rural areas, the countryside population is aging, and the remaining older people are deprived from closer communication with their children and a possibility to receive their support, and, as a result, they experience increasing social exclusion.

Herewith, one particular trend has to be mentioned as well: rich urbanites move to rural areas to take advantage of the rural environment, thus increasing rural wealth inequalities (Juska & Paulikas, 2006). On the one hand, this “counter-urbanization” is bringing new resources and cultural capital to rural areas that could be used to strengthen rural community institutions (Juska & Paulikas, 2006, p. 444); on the other hand, it strengthens stigma of rural autochthons when they are faced with an embodied success of people of the same society.

### **Economic Potential of Rural Areas**

Agriculture as one of the main sectors of the Lithuanian economy during the Soviet time (it constituted 20% of GDP in 1990) (“Lietuvos Statistikos Metraštis”, 1990, p. 159) has experienced fundamental changes after the restoration of the independence. The collapse of the communist system left rural regions with old-fashioned economic structure, few alternative economic activities, and underdeveloped social and physical infrastructure, which did not correspond to newly emerging needs of the people. The process of agricultural restructuring protracted for more than a decade, work in farms fell into disarray and, after a great decline, the agriculture stabilized only in 2000-2002. Part of the rural population not only did not succeed in adapting to the market economy, but also they could not overcome consequences of collectivization either. The role of the agricultural sector in the country’s economy has been decreasing: from 24% to 6.3% of GDP in 1992-2000 and further down to 3.3% of GDP in 2010 (Iwaskiw, 1995; “National Accounts”, 2011, p. 23).

GDP per capita is one of the indicators in the measurement of social cohesion at the macro-level. Wealthy societies (communities and regions) generate more favorable environment for development of social and human capital, which in its turn determines higher social cohesion. Taking into account different empirical indicators, economic potential of Lithuanian rural areas is much lower than that of urbanized territories. For instance, in rural areas GDP per capita in 2010 composed 50%-70% of the country’s average<sup>3</sup> and was much lower than that in the largest Lithuanian urban regions (“Statistical Yearbook of Lithuania 2011”, 2012); in

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<sup>3</sup> As was mentioned above, in economic estimations more rigorous concept of rural region is used, which is based on such indicators as density of population, distance of a region to the nearest city, etc. (Dijkstra & Ruiz, 2010).

2008-2010 material investments per person in rural regions were on average by almost one third smaller than those in urban regions (Melnikienė et al., 2011); the average monthly salary in 2007-2009 in rural regions was by 6.8% lower than in urban ones (“Statistical Yearbook of Lithuania 2011”, 2012). Recently, the economic potential of rural areas has also been affected by the EU agriculture policies, based on the “multifunctionality” of agriculture (meaning that agriculture has many functions other than commodity production, including recreation, conservation, etc.). These new trends in rural development not only strengthen economic potential of the sector but also affect the identity of rural population, require constant learning, and unconventional thinking (Clark & Jones, 2009); therefore, they can presumably have a positive impact on social cohesion.

### **Income Level, Inequality, and Poverty**

Despite the fact that the part of GDP created in the Lithuanian agricultural sector has been decreasing constantly after 1990, the number of people employed in this sector remains considerably high, namely, about 50% of rural area residents are still employed in agriculture (Chevalier, Mačiulytė, & Prapiestienė, 2010-2011). Furthermore, the share of the agricultural sector in employing labour force is 10.4% in Lithuania compared to an average 5.6% in EU countries (Chevalier et al., 2010-2011); therefore, a big dependence on primary agricultural economic activities still prevails in Lithuania. The biggest parts of rural economies are minor cooperatives or farms (the average farm size in 2006 was 12.4 ha) (“Lietuvos Kaimo”, 2009).

The income of farmer household economies, compared to the average employees’ salaries, is significantly lower; moreover, the income of many farmers consists of income in kind, which means that farmers lack cash for purchasing necessities. Farmers are one of the social groups living in the greatest need (“Joint Memorandum”, 2003). The income level of individuals in rural areas is much lower than that in cities and poverty is more prevalent. For instance, in 2006 more than a half of minimum income benefit receivers were rural residents (Lazutka, Žalimienė, Skučienė, Ivaškaitė-Tamošiūnė, & Šumskaitė, 2008). The differences in urban and rural welfare were revealed by the household budget researches. In 2010 gross income of rural population was 30% lower than that of those living in cities and comprised 2,183 Litas (around 633 Euros) per household per month. In the period of the last five years, the risk of poverty in rural areas was 2-3 times higher than in big cities and approx 1.5 times higher than in smaller towns. In 2010, poverty affected 16.2% of the population in cities, and 28.4% in rural areas (or 40.5% before social transfers excluding pensions) (“Income and Living conditions 2010”, 2011).

The data of the Lithuanian household budget research (“Income and Living conditions 2010”, 2011) indicated that housing quality in urban and rural areas contrasted strongly (for instance, in rural areas 38% of persons lacked indoor flushing toilet, while in urban areas the corresponding figure was only 5%; and a bath or a shower was lacking respectively 34% and 6% of the population). The number of centrally supplied water consumers of in rural areas (up to 2,000 individuals) comprised 30% of all population while in urban areas it constituted 90%-95%.

Poverty segregates people from the rest of society, especially when it affects disadvantaged communities such as it is currently the case in a number of Lithuanian villages. The link between poverty and social cohesion manifests itself in deprivation, because life in poverty means limited possibilities to participate, to have or do something (Fahey, Whelan, & Maître, 2005). Therefore, lower income of rural population and their higher poverty level mean fewer possibilities to participate in the education system, receive health care, have a richer leisure time, obtain various items, or enjoy good living conditions. In its turn, poverty and social inequality

brings forward the elements of “social Darwinism”, which tends to penetrate the minds of the successful ones (mostly urbanites) and incites punishment of the “failures”. This attitude strengthens the inner stigma of rural people, which is characterized by the sense of powerlessness and worthlessness, anxiety, vulnerability, and uncertainty (Juska & Paulikas, 2006).

### **Unemployment**

In the debates over social policy, it is emphasized that the concentration of socially fragile groups in certain areas creates a danger to social order and social cohesion (Forrest & Kearns, 2001). It can be observed that in Lithuania such socially frail groups as the long-term unemployed (mostly persons over 50 years old, women raising children, persons with disability), people without basic education or with unsalable profession, middle-aged people without a qualification muster in the rural area. This creates a risk of deviant social behavior, because a surge in rural crime might be interpreted as a form of passive resistance typical of poor peasantry (Juska & Paulikas, 2006). It has to be acknowledged that in many Lithuanian rural communities, asocial behaviour, alcohol abuse, and poor work motivation are serious problems (“Moksliniai Tyrimai”, 2001). Unemployment of rural residents has always been higher than that of the urbanites. For instance, in 2010 there were 16% of unemployed people in urban and 22.4% in rural areas (“Nedarbo Lygio Pokyčiai 2010”, 2011). The increasing number of the long-term unemployed in the countryside particularly could be viewed as the source of societal disintegration, because dependence on social assistance benefits worsens the people’s morality, forms deteriorated understanding of values and culture of poverty. For instance, Žalimienė and Česnaitytė’s (2006) research revealed that the main reasons why unemployed individuals in rural areas failed in finding a job, and participating in professional training or retraining programs are the lack of self-confidence, no public transport services in villages, child-care responsibilities, elderly or disabled family members, small personal farms, and stockbreeding. Additionally, expanding black economy, temporary, and odd jobs in private sector draws in a significant part of employable people thus degrading the quality of occupation (Marcinkevičiūtė & Petrauskienė, 2007).

### **Health and Education**

Research data allow presupposing that one of the ways to strengthen social cohesion is ensuring universal accessibility of public goods and opportunities for marginalized groups to participate in social systems (Vergolini, 2001). Some of those important social systems are public health, pre-school education, and secondary education.

Health care services infrastructure in Lithuania is concentrated in the cities, and the trend of reducing these services in rural regions has been observed for several years. As a result, rural people experience higher exclusion from health services not only due to lower income or failure to participate in social insurance system but also due to often remote place of residence and lack of available public transport services. Households’ surveys reveal that almost one third more of the rural population compared to urban population did not have a possibility to profit from health services because of the unaffordable price of these services or their place of residence being located too far from the city and no transport services available to reach them (“Household Budgets 2008”, 2009).

After the restoration of independence, the system of social services in the countryside underwent fundamental changes. Firstly, the development of rural social services shifted from the competence of “kolkhoz” to municipalities that lacked experience in the field. Additionally, the privatization or closure of

rural kindergartens, primary health care institutions, and recreational houses began (Žalimienė, 1994). In the period of 1990-1996, about 60% of rural kindergartens were closed, and the number of children in them decreased by more than 43% ("Living Standards and Choices", 1997). The decreasing birth rate (observed till 2009) along with the lack of a clear family policy had an impact on the further reduction of preschool education institutions in rural areas. During the period of 1990-2010, the number of these institutions in the cities decreased by about 40% while in the rural areas it fell by about 86% ("Joint Memorandum", 2003; "Education 2010", 2011). In 2010, children aged 1-6 years not enrolled into pre-primary education comprised 29.7% in cities and 77.3% in the countryside ("Education 2010", 2011). For the purpose of solving the preschool education problem, last decade the establishment of universal multifunctional centers in rural communities on the basis of closing secondary schools was supported from the EU structural funds ("National Education Strategy 2003-2012", 2003).

Since the 1990s, secondary education in Lithuania has also experienced many reforms. Due to the reform and insufficient number of children in countryside, the infrastructure of education services in rural area narrowed down ("Joint Memorandum", 2003). For instance, there are only a few high schools in rural areas; therefore, rural children often have to travel long distances to those institutions (Žalimienė, Lazutka, Skučienė, Aidukaitė, Ivaškaitė-Tamošiūnė, & Kazakevičiūtė, 2011). The level of early withdrawal of 18-24 years old individuals from the education system (those who do not have secondary education and do not continue learning), in 2008 in rural areas was 15.7% higher than in cities ("Education and Educational Attainment", 2008). As a consequence, access to secondary education and the choice of opportunities for people in rural areas became less favorable, and inequality in accessibility of education services between cities and the countryside increased. All in all, background qualification of Lithuanian rural residents is lower than that of the urban residents and human capital in rural areas is weaker: In 2006, 7.6% of rural population had higher education compared to 20.4% of the urban residents. This inevitably has an impact on the employment rate: in 2006 the share of employed population comprised 29.8% in cities and 12.2% in the countryside ("Labour Force", 2007).

### **General Conclusion**

The above presented data reveal the problems of social exclusion of rural population in Lithuania as well as obstacles to social cohesion between the city and the countryside and in the countryside itself. Lithuanian rural community is characterized by a high dependence on agricultural production, rapid aging of the population, and compared to cities, lower income level and much higher poverty, high rate of long-term unemployment, poorer structure of rural people's education, lesser accessibility to health services, etc. Numerous social and economical problems separate village not only from the city but also individual people from each other as well.

In the picture of rural life, which was presented, few prerequisites for social trust, solidarity, cooperative structures, etc., which constitutes the foundation of social cohesion, can be traced. The "solidarity" of rural people is often based not on common social action, equal accessibility to opportunities and goods, but mostly on common disadvantages and deprivation. Therefore, the danger remains present that the so-called "particularized trust" in one's own group (namely rural people) (Uslaner & Conley, 2003) can one day take the form of a social conflict (Green et al., 2011), which can even further erode bridges between urban and rural population and hinder solution of fundamental socio-political problems. What is the role of social work in this

situation? Can the development of social services and social work contribute to the solution of the above-mentioned problems and strengthen rural social cohesion? What are the empowerment strategies or inclusionary practices, which may affect social cohesion in the Lithuanian countryside and restore the sense of shared social life in Lithuania in general?

### **The Development of Community Movement and Social Work Services as Instruments for Enhancing Social Cohesion**

#### **Development of Infrastructure of Social Services in Rural Areas**

After the collapse of the Soviet regime, the care service system, which consisted of state residential care institutions and which was inspired, controlled and financed by the Soviet government, was demolished (Ilgius, 2001). In 1990, the development of a new social work sector based on the principles of democratic state and decentralization of services started in Lithuania. In 1996, after the adoption of the *Law on Social Services*, the responsibility of municipalities to provide their population with the necessary social work services and to finance the establishment of a service network was embedded (“Law on Social Services”, 1996). Fast changes of this sector under the support of international community began and currently a network of different types of social work services operates in municipalities (“Social Report”, 1999). For instance, new type of services—home care services—have been offered in each municipality and new positions within the framework of these services—social workers as community organizers—have been established. However, in many regions of the country the dominating social work institutions of rural infrastructure are established in regional centers, but undeveloped public transport services do not guarantee accessibility of those services to rural population. For instance, in the annual municipal social service plans<sup>4</sup> for 2010, about 75% of municipalities emphasized lesser accessibility of social services to rural people (“Socialinių Paslaugų Planai”, 2010). Although community social services’ supply can be increased by NGOs’ involvement, yet only a few municipalities have made attempts to expand the services’ supply by drawing in more NGOs. In the period of economic crisis in 2007-2010, the financing of NGOs, as service providers, decreased significantly (“Socialinių Paslaugų Planai”, 2010). Thus, NGOs, as actors in the field of personal social services’ provision and components of rural social capital, are not involved sufficiently.

The disparity between governmental policies and daily socio-economic problems of rural population, actual needs for social services and their tangible supply inspired the rise of a community movement in Lithuania, which was often led by well-educated people representing social professions, including social workers themselves.

#### **Community Movement in Lithuania**

The boom of rural civic movements, which started in 2000, can be interpreted as one of the responses to the post-socialist crisis in agriculture as well as a strategy of dealing with growing economic, political, and social marginalization in rural settlements (Juska, Poviliunas, Ziliukaite, & Geguziene, 2008). In 2000 there were 10 rural community organizations, in 2005 there were 1,200, in 2010 the number was 1,600 (“Kaimo Plėtra”, 2011). Most activities were aimed at the elimination of social exclusion and poverty (Gegužienė & Žiliukaitė, 2004). As it was already discussed, the remarkable inequality of income determines strong

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<sup>4</sup> Municipalities annually submit public social service plans, in which the sufficiency, accessibility, and quality of service have to be evaluated.

polarization of power in society, which enhances passiveness of the representatives of lower income stratum due to the feelings of one's weak power (Solt, 2008). Researches indicate that often community development is viewed as a "third social method" in the area of social work (Hinte, 2008) aimed at overcoming mutual disbelief among people, creating the sense of belonging and thus promoting more cohesive society. Community development, as practice and research indicate, is well mastered by social professionals, especially social workers, who due to professional knowledge often become pacemakers in processes leading to social participation and inclusion. Community development means a continuous community building, in which the process is not less important than the results. This building is successful when it is initiated and supported by community people, well-planned, beneficial to the community, and encouraging the participation of people. To remember T. Chalmer, who has developed parish community support model, social support of the vulnerable community members has to be taken over by community itself, because only the community members know real needs of people living nearby (Wendt, 1990).

The main aim (and the result) of community development is the growth of life quality ("Bendruomenės Plėtra", 2004). As this aim fully coheres with the aims of social work services, community social work may be a form and a platform for the pursuit of this aim.

### **The Role of Social Workers in Strengthening Social Cohesion**

Rapid social changes which took place after the collapse of the Soviet system and a failure of many rural people to assimilate them imply that the elderly, the disabled, the unemployed, young people without profession, families in social risk groups etc. have to be provided with psychological, social, and economical support in order to stop the reproduction of poverty, social exclusion, and community disorganization. Remarkable inequality in society discussed above creates a need not only to provide standardized social services for rural population, but also to offer the opportunities for education, employment, and self-realization which in its turn imply capacity building and development of self-motivation. What kind of social work is needed and can be successful in these circumstances?

Despite that key functions of a social worker are identical in rural and urban areas, one research revealed some differences in these professionals' attitude to their daily social work practice: urban social workers gave priority to patience, openness, flexibility, and respect to differences, whereas rural social workers emphasised obedience to norms and rules of the institution and directive approach (Amšiejūtė, 2012). These differences may be partly explained by unrealistic expectations of rural inhabitants and not clearly articulated needs—this is one of the main challenges rural social workers encounter (Marcinkevičiūtė & Petrauskienė, 2007). Therefore, the important task of a social worker is to help rural people concretize their needs and provide them with a spectrum of alternative solutions, which would facilitate decisions. This task, however, might instigate the directive approach mentioned earlier. The similar area of concern has been revealed by Gevorgianienė's research (2009): the analysis of community needs, which was considered as a prerequisite for the work with community (Juska, Poviliunas, & Pozzutto, 2005), was not considered by rural social workers equally important as other activities. Such attitude implies a danger of employing managerial strategies, which, without taking community priorities into account, will not guarantee success. Paradoxically, managerial strategies, aimed at community building may weaken not strengthen social cohesion due to the lack of real attention to the diverse needs of various groups. Besides, these strategies contradict with the empowerment approach, which is important for the revival of rural people's self-esteem and the elimination of stigma.

The task to help people recognize and formulate their needs is closely related to educating people and encompasses another important area of social work, namely, the spread of information about various job, leisure, cultural, and social service opportunities. Such function is inherent to social worker's profession and is facilitated by the web-based "Communities Portal"<sup>5</sup> which provides information on different topics. However, not all people in the countryside have access to computers and internet: in 2010 only 39% of rural population had computers at home and 41% of them had access to internet, while in the cities these numbers were 61% and 62% respectively ("Information Technologies", 2011, pp. 56-58).

Another important competence emphasized by rural social workers was the ability to attract external financial resources for local needs (Gevorgianienė, 2009). This need is evidently caused by difficult economic situation and a lack of government attention to the needs of local communities. However, focusing on the management of financial resources and making little reckoning of immediate community needs could end in an ineffective community work.

Finally, the research of the desirable competences of rural social workers (Gevorgianienė, 2009) revealed that according to social workers, practice in rural communities motivates them to seek specific knowledge and skills. Rural social workers feel the need to clarify their new professional role, that is, to develop a new identity in work with the community. The data proved (Gegužienė & Žiliukaitė, 2004; Juska et al., 2005; Hinte, 2008; etc.) that in the first stages of community formation (especially in rural settlements) the most important role is played by active professionals. Since community may become the first agent of social support for those in need, a social worker often assumes a role of a community leader and even its organizer. This new status requires efforts to reconcile professional code with additional requirements.

### Conclusions

The analysis of the socio-economic situation in Lithuanian rural area reveals that there is a set of hindrances at the macro and community level for pursuing social cohesion between the countryside and the city in Lithuania. First of all, these hindrances cannot be eliminated without the active social policy of the government, but they also call for community involvement. Without a social policy of state, oriented toward decreasing inequalities between the city and the rural area and the development of social services that address daily needs of rural people, social cohesion may become, according to Vasta (2010) and other authors, only a way to conceal existing inequalities and widen the gap between the city and the village. Secondly, initiative and motivation of rural people themselves can become a factor eliminating disbelief in a better future and encouraging changes in their life. Social work professionals, by using their competence of communication and social networking, and by applying an approach of empowerment, may play an important role in the modern Lithuanian village: that is, to increase the cognition of the problems, which require change, to encourage initiative and trust in people's ability to make changes. This role of a social worker requires not only well-mastered competences, described in relevant laws, but also a commitment to promote dignity and human rights of the people. In that aspect, rural social work professionals can also play an important role in Lithuanian society in general by conveying to the governmental bodies the causes and outcomes of difficulties, which the rural population experiences, and shaping the new attitude, namely that the village people are not the "leftovers" of the past-Soviet system, but rather people deprived of the possibilities to build their well-being

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<sup>5</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.bendruomenes.lt/static/show/english>.

due to socio-political cataclysm, and therefore deserving compensation in terms of investment and new opportunities.

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