

Rural areas as a basis for the formation of agro-social systems under conditions of decentralization in Ukraine

Áreas rurais como base para a formação de sistemas agro-sociais em condições de descentralização na Ucrânia

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Submission: January 8th, 2025 | Acceptance: April 19th, 2025

ABSTRACT

The article examines the development of rural areas under conditions of decentralization. The primary objectives of sustainable development of rural areas include the establishment of a stable social environment. A rural area, as an agrosocial system, is an objective combination of three key components - environmental, economic, and social - which together ensure the resilience of this system.

In Ukraine, there are certain prerequisites for sustainable development. However, there is a lack of clear principles and regulatory methods at the level of rural settlements that take into account the essential characteristics of rural development. Measures for sustainable development of rural areas are currently being formed as a distinct direction of state policy. The state's influence on rural areas is exercised through the management and regulatory functions of public policy, which are reflected in legislative and regulatory acts. The article addresses the socio-economic aspects of developing local self-governance in rural areas, the particularities of organizing life in rural territories, and the formation of potential for growth. It justifies the need to enhance activities aimed at increasing the role of local self-governance and implementing modern principles of economic reform in rural areas. The article confirms that the decentralization process is complex, involving numerous contradictions related to finding the optimal model of local self-governance.

The risks and threats associated with the decentralization process are identified, and the potential impact on the socio-economic development of rural areas is substantiated. The article emphasizes the necessity of creating a comprehensive vision of relevant measures, establishing clear criteria for their assessment, and forecasting their influence on the socio-economic development of rural areas to enhance the effectiveness of decentralization policies. It is demonstrated that the development of a mechanism for diversifying rural area growth must consider strategic directions and an analysis of the current state of socio-ecological-economic development of rural territories.

KEYWORDS: Rural areas. Territorial communities. Decentralization. Sustainable development. Land resources. State regional policy. Ukraine.

RESUMO

O artigo examina o desenvolvimento das áreas rurais em condições de descentralização. Os principais objetivos do desenvolvimento sustentável das áreas rurais incluem o estabelecimento de um ambiente social estável. Uma área rural, como um sistema agro-social, é uma combinação objetiva de três componentes principais – ambiental, econômico e social – que, juntos, garantem a resiliência desse sistema. Na Ucrânia, existem certos pré-requisitos para o desenvolvimento sustentável. No entanto, há uma falta de princípios claros e métodos regulatórios no nível dos assentamentos rurais que levem em consideração as características essenciais do desenvolvimento rural. As medidas para o desenvolvimento sustentável das áreas rurais estão sendo atualmente formadas como uma direção distinta da política estatal. A influência do Estado sobre as áreas rurais é exercida por meio das funções de gestão e regulação da política pública, refletidas em atos legislativos e normativos. O artigo aborda os aspectos socioeconômicos

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do desenvolvimento da autogestão local nas áreas rurais, as particularidades da organização da vida nos territórios rurais e a formação de potencial de crescimento. Justifica a necessidade de intensificar atividades voltadas para aumentar o papel da autogestão local e implementar princípios modernos de reforma econômica nas áreas rurais. O artigo confirma que o processo de descentralização é complexo, envolvendo numerosas contradições relacionadas à busca pelo modelo ideal de autogestão local. São identificados os riscos e ameaças associados ao processo de descentralização, e o impacto potencial no desenvolvimento socioeconômico das áreas rurais é fundamentado. O artigo enfatiza a necessidade de criar uma visão abrangente das medidas relevantes, estabelecer critérios claros para sua avaliação e prever sua influência no desenvolvimento socioeconômico das áreas rurais, a fim de aumentar a eficácia das políticas de descentralização. Demonstra-se que o desenvolvimento de um mecanismo para diversificar o crescimento das áreas rurais deve considerar direções estratégicas e uma análise do estado atual do desenvolvimento socioeconômico, ecológico e econômico dos territórios rurais.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Áreas rurais. Comunidades territoriais. Descentralização. Desenvolvimento sustentável. Recursos fundiários. Política regional estatal. Ucrânia.

INTRODUCTION

Ensuring the comprehensive development of rural areas aimed at improving infrastructure, creating jobs, and enhancing living conditions is a strategic goal of decentralization. This goal can be achieved through the collaboration of communities, businesses, and local self-government bodies. Sustainable development of rural areas under decentralization aims to position these areas as a distinct focus of state policy, redirecting agricultural policy from merely supporting the agrarian sector of the economy to fostering the development of rural territories. The objective is to improve the quality of life for the rural population through community development.

Rural development encompasses a broad spectrum of initiatives aimed at enhancing the economic, social, and environmental well-being of rural communities. It involves efforts to improve infrastructure, create employment opportunities, and elevate living standards in areas outside urban centers. The significance of rural development lies in its potential to reduce poverty, ensure food security, and promote sustainable livelihoods for a substantial portion of the global population residing in rural areas (ATKINSON 2017).

Over the years, rural development policies have evolved to address the multifaceted challenges faced by these communities. Initially focused on agricultural productivity, modern policies now adopt a more integrated approach, considering factors such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure development. This shift acknowledges that sustainable rural development requires a holistic strategy that goes beyond agriculture to include social and economic dimensions.

The importance of rural development is further underscored by its role in national and global economies. For instance, the World Development Report 2008 emphasized that GDP growth originating in agriculture is significantly more effective in raising incomes among the poorest populations compared to growth in other sectors (WORLD BANK 2007). This highlights the critical need for investment in rural areas to stimulate broader economic development.

The study of rural development issues is gaining increasing relevance amidst the implementation of local self-governance reform and territorial organization of power in Ukraine. These changes have a direct impact on the administrative, territorial, and

socio-economic indicators of community, regional, and national development. The rural population of Ukraine makes up almost 31% of the total population, and agricultural lands make up 70% of the state's land fund (STORONYANSKA *et al.* 2021). This makes a significant contribution to the economy. They play a vital role in domestic food security and constitute a substantial part of the nation's export potential.

Decentralization facilitates the structural transformation of rural areas, altering their territorial and administrative organization and introducing new approaches to sustainable development. It also empowers united territorial communities by granting them the necessary authority and resources. This, in turn, broadens the opportunities for communities and provides levers for stimulating rural development.

The unprovoked armed aggression by the Russian Federation against Ukraine, along with recent international developments, has highlighted the indispensable and priority role of domestic agribusiness. As a core component of the agro-industrial complex and a crucial element of the agricultural sector and the national economy, Ukrainian agribusiness is fundamental in ensuring food security both within Ukraine and globally (FEDCHYSHYN *et al.* 2024).

Creating the necessary conditions to ensure a sustainable development process in rural areas is crucial for laying the groundwork for the socio-economic advancement of the entire country. However, in Ukraine the communities formed through the decentralization reform, particularly in rural areas, have inherited numerous local issues (FEDCHYSHYN *et al.* 2023). These include a low level of economic development, inadequate infrastructure, and a lack of access to modern public services across nearly all essential sectors (such as education, healthcare, transportation, communications, utilities, and finance).

The existing challenges related to self-realization and fair compensation, especially in the production sector, have led to a significant outflow of economically active residents, particularly the youth, in search of better job opportunities and living conditions. This trend is marked by a high rate of economically inactive residents in rural areas (39.1% as of 2020) and an ongoing aging process among the rural population, which further exacerbates social and economic problems in Society (DANILYNA *et al.* 2021).

Addressing local development issues and achieving the functional capacity of newly established communities requires exploring new approaches to territorial management and developing a socio-economic foundation. This should be based on utilizing local resources and internal potential to achieve sustainable economic growth and improve the socio-economic indicators and living standards of the population. The comprehensive development of rural areas is a strategic goal that necessitates a collaborative approach involving communities, businesses, and local self-government bodies. By integrating various sectors and disciplines, and by adopting innovative planning methodologies, sustainable rural development can be achieved, ultimately improving the quality of life for rural populations and contributing to broader socio-economic advancement.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This study adopts a multidisciplinary approach to examine the role of decentralization in fostering sustainable rural development in Ukraine. The research draws upon a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies, including policy analysis, case studies, and secondary data review. The analysis is grounded in the theoretical and empirical foundations laid by a series of scientific works developed by Ukrainian and international researchers in the field of decentralization and regional development. Among them are SHAPOVALOVA (2015), LUKERYA & HALUSHKA (2016), JARÁBIK & YESMUKHANOVA (2017), BALLER (2017), DUDLEY (2019), and ROMANOVA & UMLAND (2020), who critically examined the evolution, goals, and implementation of decentralization reform in Ukraine. Their works are focused on enhancing multi-level governance, empowering local self-government, and improving public service delivery. These insights offer a critical foundation for understanding how decentralization has transformed local governance structures and created new opportunities for rural development.

The methodology includes an in-depth review of decentralization policies initiated since 2014, which aimed at improving multi-level governance, enhancing subnational democracy, and strengthening the capacity of local self-government institutions. These reforms were implemented with the intention of empowering territorial communities through the devolution of power and financial resources, fostering local decision-making, and improving service delivery in sectors such as education, healthcare, infrastructure, and administration.

The Ukrainian decentralization reform is partially based on international examples, particularly similar reforms implemented in Poland during the 1990s (LEVITAS & DJIKIC 2017). It has received substantial technical support from international (mainly Western) partners. However, this process is largely a “homegrown” Ukrainian initiative, driven by domestic rather than external impulses. The reform is based primarily on lessons learned from previous, often unsuccessful, attempts by Kyiv to improve subnational governance before 2014 (ROMANOVA 2011).

The significance of this research lies in the urgent need for new scientific and methodological approaches to the development of modern rural areas under decentralization. These approaches have the potential to significantly enhance the living standards of the rural population. Therefore, studying the development of Ukrainian rural areas should focus on identifying mechanisms for sustainable development.

Research on rural development has been conducted by several scholars, including O. V. Olshanska, T. V. Kurman, A. M. Mikhnenko, V. D. Bakumenko, S. O. Borysevich, O. Y. Obolensky, I. M. Kulchiiy, M. A. Khvesyuk, I. O. Irtysheva, and T. V. Stroiko, among others. Their work provides a substantial scientific and methodological foundation for examining rural area issues. The socio-economic scale of these problems opens opportunities for exploring previously unexamined aspects and continuing scientific investigation.

In particular, the most relevant area of focus is the development of mechanisms to enhance rural area development in the context of decentralization. Although the scientific contributions of these authors address key issues, they lack a systemic and

integrative approach to territorial management of rural development within the framework of decentralization. This gap highlights the need for further scientific exploration in the context of forming and advancing the development prospects of united territorial communities.

By linking decentralization to rural development through policy analysis and empirical investigation, the research aims to identify both opportunities and constraints in leveraging local governance reform as a tool for sustainable development. The methodology emphasizes a systems-thinking approach, recognizing the interdependence of administrative, economic, and social dimensions in achieving long-term rural resilience.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Rural Areas as a Foundation for Agro-Social Systems

The concept of sustainable development is based on the idea of a dynamically balanced interaction among economic, social, and environmental spheres of societal progress. The socio-economic foundation of sustainable development presupposes a global-scale implementation of measures aimed at combating poverty, changing consumption patterns, and preserving human health. Sustainable development encompasses three main components: sustainable economic development, sustainable social development, and ongoing environmental sustainability (ZAITSEVA 2019).

In the context of regional policy implementation, a new dimension emerges—sustainable regional development. This approach has been recognized as a norm and standard in the European Union, serving as the cornerstone of European regional policy. In this study, we explore rural areas as primary elements of sustainable development. Essentially, these are the building blocks from which agro-social systems will be formed under conditions of decentralization.

Rural areas play a critical role in the functioning of any state. Globally, rural areas constitute approximately 75% of the total land area, housing 51% of the world's population. These areas contribute to 32% of the global GDP. Rural areas as the basis for forming agro-social systems are key to enhancing the living standards and quality of life. A significant aspect of this process is maintaining social and cultural stability, as well as ensuring the fair and rational distribution of all types of resources within society (ZAMORA 2019).

The primary objectives of sustainable development in rural areas include the creation of a stable social environment, and the establishment of an equitable society that addresses systemic issues such as poverty eradication, unemployment reduction, and the expansion of productive employment opportunities. Additionally, promoting social integration is crucial. A substantial role is assigned to the active participation of individuals in public processes affecting their livelihoods, which is essential for implementing the fundamental principles of democracy, restructuring civil society, and fostering effective social development.

The sustainable development framework aims to establish a balanced approach across economic, social, and environmental domains. This involves strategies that foster inclusive economic growth, improve social equity, and preserve ecological

integrity. Recognizing the importance of rural areas in this dynamic, regional policy has been adapted to incorporate sustainable development as a critical objective. For the EU, this alignment has set a standard, making sustainable regional development a core aspect of its policy agenda.

In this context, rural areas act as primary units, or “atoms”, in building agro-social systems within the decentralized framework. These areas not only contribute significantly to national and global economies but also serve as fundamental spaces for implementing policies aimed at enhancing community well-being. Through targeted measures, rural areas can become resilient and adaptive systems that underpin broader socio-economic stability. The active involvement of local populations in governance and decision-making processes is vital, as it strengthens democracy and civil society, while also contributing to sustainable socio-economic progress.

This integrative approach to managing rural development highlights the need for policies that address the unique challenges of rural areas. By focusing on balanced growth and resource allocation, the foundation is laid for creating inclusive, sustainable, and thriving rural communities that are essential to overall national development.

Agricultural policy plays a vital role in achieving sustainable rural development. However, it requires detailed strategic planning based on regional issues and gaps in the implementation of previous sustainable development plans (KORNIYENKO *et al.* 2024).

The sustainable development of rural areas must ensure the integration and balanced consideration of its four main components: social, economic, environmental, and institutional.

The social component should focus on creating optimal social conditions and enhancing the quality of life for individuals. The economic component should be based on maximizing income while preserving and increasing the existing functional aggregate capital, as well as expanding the production of competitive goods. The environmental component should prioritize the integrity of the biosphere and ecosystems, as well as their capacity for self-regeneration.

The institutional component should aim to strengthen the role of institutions in ensuring sustainable socio-economic development of rural areas, and in harmonizing regulatory procedures and legal frameworks that guide the actions of local self-government bodies within united territorial communities.

The only way to implement the strategy of sustainable development of rural areas of Ukraine is the formation of an economic mechanism that includes methods, techniques, levers and tools that will ensure a certain balance between social, economic and environmental components of rural life as a multifunctional system to adapt to existing conditions, ensuring a synergetic effect and achievement of strategic landmarks, defined goals and objectives (SHARAPOVA *et al.* 2021).

The concept of sustainable regional development is an integral component of European regional policy. Specifically, the principle of “sustainable development” is recognized as one of the core principles of local self-governance, embodying the ethos of “Good Governance” at the local level in the context of decentralization. At the primary territorial level — the community level — particular emphasis is placed on the

principle of sustainable development and long-term planning. This includes ensuring that current policies account for the interests of future generations; integrating sustainable development elements into societal governance so as not to burden future generations with unresolved environmental, financial, economic, or social issues; and providing a broad, long-term outlook on future community development, taking into consideration historical, cultural, social, ecological, and other factors that define the principle of sustainable development.

One cannot but agree with the opinion of O. OLSHANSKA (2013), who emphasizes the pressing relevance of defining the essence, structure, and scope of agro-social systems, both functional and territorial. In the context of active application of the law of territorial division of labor, which promotes the development of interregional or global connections, it is essential to adopt a differentiated approach when defining the structure and scale of agro-social systems, taking into account specific regional conditions and advantages.

In this regard, it is worth noting that such a territorial division contributes to the specialization of regions in the production of certain types of agricultural products, which is based on the natural, economic and social conditions of each region. In Ukraine, several examples of regional specialization can be distinguished: 1) forest-steppe zone, where the cultivation of grain crops, sugar beets and the development of meat and dairy farming prevail; 2) steppe zone, where the main emphasis is on the cultivation of winter wheat, sunflower and the development of sheep farming (LUPENKO & KROPYVKO 2013); 3) Polissya, region that specializes in the cultivation of flax, potatoes and the development of forestry.

This approach allows for the effective use of the natural and climatic conditions of each region, increasing the productivity and quality of agricultural products. We can also talk about:

1) economic efficiency. The specialization of regions allows for the reduction of the cost of production due to the concentration of production and the use of advanced technologies. This also contributes to the development of interregional and international economic ties (ZAVADSKYKH 2018).

2) social development: The development of agro-social systems based on the territorial division of labor contributes to the creation of new jobs, raising the standard of living of the population and developing infrastructure in rural regions.

3) environmental sustainability: Taking into account natural conditions when specializing regions contributes to the preservation of soil fertility, the rational use of water resources and the maintenance of biodiversity. Moreover, key priorities must include addressing issues related to employment, food security, the provision of goods and services, and the improvement of medical, cultural, educational, and housing services, as well as the preservation of a favorable natural living environment. The most comprehensive range of services and conditions that holistically meet the needs of rural residents is found within the framework of amalgamated territorial communities. A significant advantage of this framework is the presence of a state-level administrative unit, which serves as an important coordinating body. It is evident that both now and in the future, ensuring employment opportunities for rural inhabitants, coordinating efforts to form inter-settlement production and other complexes, and developing

territorial cluster models of economic activity are pressing issues. The successful resolution of these challenges largely depends on effective inter-settlement administrative coordination. This role can be fulfilled by regional management bodies in collaboration with agrarian business entities, local self-government authorities, and territorial communities.

In recent years, the system of political measures in Ukraine targeting rural areas has been shaped according to established national priority objectives, while also taking into account the interests of specific regions.

Among such political measures targeting rural areas through strategic national initiatives we can name: the Single and Comprehensive Strategy and Action Plan for Agriculture and Rural Development 2015-2020 (MINISTRY OF AGRARIAN POLICY AND FOOD OF UKRAINE 2015) and the Strategy of Agriculture and Rural Development of Ukraine – 2030 (MINISTRY OF AGRARIAN POLICY AND FOOD OF UKRAINE 2024). These policies were primarily developed by Ukraine's Ministry of Agrarian Policy and Food, often in collaboration with international partners such as the FAO and the European Union, to align with both national priorities and European integration goals (KOVALENKO *et al.* 2025). The development process emphasized decentralization, sustainable development goals, and environmental sustainability.

Public participation played an increasing role in shaping these policies. Mechanisms such as participatory budgeting allowed citizens to propose and vote on rural development projects using digital tools (CIVIL SOCIETY DEVELOPMENT FORUM 2018). Additionally, community-based organizations were involved in planning and monitoring local initiatives, promoting grassroots engagement in governance (KVARTIUK 2015). The strategies aim to balance national objectives with regional needs, ensuring that rural development in Ukraine is inclusive, sustainable, and responsive to both top-down priorities and bottom-up input.

Optimization of the structure of administrative-territorial units in the context of sustainable rural development and the decentralization process in Ukraine

Democratization often leads to decentralization, as the emergence of political pluralism generates public demands for the redistribution of power between central and subnational levels of governance, favoring the latter (GRINDLE 2009).

In recent years, the adoption of fundamental legislative and regulatory acts aimed at reforming local self-governance and the administrative-territorial organization of power at the basic level in Ukraine has somewhat improved the economic and social situation in rural areas. Notably, the creation of territorial communities through the amalgamation of village or settlement councils has increased opportunities for expanding employment prospects for the rural population.

For instance, in the program document of the President of Ukraine, approved by the Decree of January 15, 2015, "On the Strategy for Sustainable Development "Ukraine 2020", a portion of the focus is dedicated to a set of reforms aimed at the sequential and sustainable development of rural areas. To practically implement the provisions of the "Strategy – 2020" for rural development, the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine adopted several regulatory acts. These include the Resolutions of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine dated August 6, 2014, No. 385 "State Regional Development Strategy for the Period up to 2020" and dated October 7, 2017, No. 821 "Certain Issues

of Implementing the State Regional Development Strategy for the Period up to 2020”, which approved the action plan for implementing the provisions of the state strategy. These documents primarily adopt a sectoral approach to rural development, in line with existing principles of differentiating territories by types and regimes of their predominant use, characterized by agro-industrial production and rural development.

The President of Ukraine, by his Decree of September 30, 2019, “On the sustainable development goals of Ukraine for the period up to 2030”, once again endorsed the global Sustainable Development Goals up to 2030, as proclaimed in the United Nations General Assembly Resolution No. 70/1 of September 25, 2015, and adapted them considering the specific development conditions of Ukraine, as outlined in the National Report “Sustainable Development Goals of Ukraine”. Goal 11 of this report focuses on the sustainable development of cities and communities. One of the tasks under this goal is to ensure the development of settlements and territories exclusively based on comprehensive planning and management with public participation.

To achieve Goal 11, among other initiatives, the necessity to approve and implement the State Regional Development Strategy for the period up to 2027 was identified. This strategy was adopted on August 5, 2020 (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine Resolution No. 695), introducing new approaches to regional development policy. These approaches shift from a predominantly territorially neutral policy to a territorially targeted development policy, aimed at stimulating the utilization of local potential and strengthening the connection between strategic, spatial, and budgetary planning.

This framework reflects a move towards optimizing the structure of administrative-territorial units, enhancing the coordination between regional policies, and effectively utilizing the local socio-economic and environmental capacities for sustainable development within the decentralization process.

Thus, the development of rural areas in Ukraine began in 2015 with the adoption of the Law of Ukraine “On the voluntary association of territorial communities”. As of early 2021, this law led to the creation of 1,439 amalgamated territorial communities (ATCs), of which 627, or 43.6%, were rural communities. During the administrative-territorial reform, 26,705 villages (97.5% of the total number in Ukraine) became part of ATCs. Of these, 8,870 villages (33.2%) were included in urban ATCs, 9,397 (35.2%) in settlement ATCs, and 8,438 (31.6%) in rural ATCs (LUPENKO & PATYKA 2022). As of early 2022, there were 1,438 territorial communities in Ukraine, including 628 rural territorial communities (Decentralization 2023).

The decentralization reform in Ukraine includes two main components: fiscal decentralization and administrative-territorial reform, which involves the creation of amalgamated territorial communities.

Based on the results of the decentralization reform in Ukraine, it has been identified that decentralization, particularly financial decentralization, creates conditions for the socio-economic development of ATCs, including the creation of new jobs for residents of rural areas. One indicator of this capability is the increase in financial inflows to local budgets. For instance, the share of local budgets in the consolidated budget of Ukraine is constantly growing and at the end of 2017 amounted

to 51.2% (in 2015 – 45.6%) (SAVASTEYEVA 2019).

One of the reasons for this growth was the increase in revenue due to job creation within the communities. In the initial stages of ATC operations, including rural areas, jobs were mainly created in sectors such as administrative, medical, educational, and social services. At subsequent stages of development and operation of rural ATCs, it is advisable to focus on attracting both internal revenue and investments to develop the production sector and other service sectors, particularly non-agricultural industries, construction, transportation, tourism, and recreation.

These entirely new entities of local self-government in Ukraine have been granted significant powers for tax collection and direct transfers from the central state budget. For example, following the model of the Baltic and Scandinavian countries, ATCs in Ukraine receive 60% of the collected personal income tax (ROMANOVA & UMLAND 2019). This fiscal empowerment can facilitate job creation in sectors such as administration, healthcare, education, and social services, enhancing local economies and improving public service delivery. However, the expansion into non-agricultural industries, construction, transportation, tourism, and recreation raises environmental considerations. Industrialization and infrastructure development can lead to habitat fragmentation, pollution, and resource depletion if not managed sustainably.

The ongoing conflict has further exacerbated environmental degradation, with reports indicating significant damage to ecosystems and biodiversity. Therefore, it is crucial for ATCs to integrate environmental assessments into their development plans, adopt green technologies, and promote sustainable practices to balance economic growth with ecological preservation.

This profound process has laid the groundwork for a qualitatively new social contract among citizens living in various ATCs, local authorities, and local business communities. Decentralization, for instance, incentivizes local councils to maintain and expand their tax base, attracting businesses and investments. ATCs also take on additional responsibility for providing public services and fostering infrastructure development. A key feature of Ukrainian decentralization today is that the formation of ATCs is carried out on a voluntary basis, which promotes the development of local democracy. The faster and more transparent local governance is, the sooner new enterprises will settle (BERNARD 2015).

The primary achievement of decentralization thus far has been the initiation of territorial consolidation of municipalities and the corresponding expansion of the rights and capabilities of local self-governance within these enlarged communities (hromadas). Thanks to the democratic approach to planning and the creation of amalgamated territorial communities (ATCs), many Ukrainians have gained valuable experience in organizing effective collective actions within the legal framework since 2015. They have become active participants in discussions on local governance issues and have taken on responsibilities for joint decision-making.

Following the establishment of new ATCs, elections are held for newly formed local self-governance bodies with expanded powers. These bodies are responsible for infrastructure development, the allocation of state funds, and the execution of various regulatory functions previously managed by regional and district administrations and councils.

Thus, in the context of decentralization in Ukraine, new opportunities have emerged for the sustainable development of rural areas, and local self-governance bodies have been provided with conditions to operate more effectively. The expansion of powers for local self-governance bodies at various levels should be implemented in a manner that, on one hand, brings the decision-making process as close as possible to the citizens and, on the other hand, ensures that these bodies have sufficient organizational, material, and financial resources to provide the necessary scope and quality of services for the population.

Multifunctional Development of Rural Areas

Transitioning to a diversified (multifunctional) rural economy involves developing and implementing a system of incentives for agricultural producers to establish new production facilities for the deep processing of agricultural products, aimed at increasing added value. Key priorities of this program include:

- encouraging entrepreneurial activity. Supporting the production of non-traditional agricultural products and developing non-agricultural rural enterprises such as eco-tourism, agro-tourism, and educational ventures. In 2023, over 150 small farms benefited from government programs supported by the World Bank, aimed at improving access to affordable finance and diversifying agricultural production through horticulture. For instance, “Victoria’s Sense”, a blueberry farm in the Kyiv region, received a grant to expand its operations, providing employment opportunities to local residents, including those affected by the conflict (WORLD BANK 2023a).

- expansion of non-production services. Enhancing communal and household services in rural areas. Taking into account martial time in Ukraine, it is worth mentioning the eVidnovlennia Program. Launched in May 2023, this program provided financial assistance for Ukrainians to repair or purchase new homes damaged by hostilities. By May 2024, over 57,000 individuals had benefited, with more than UAH 11 billion disbursed, contributing to the restoration of housing infrastructure in affected rural areas (CABINET OF MINISTERS OF UKRAINE 2024).

- development of agricultural cooperatives. Focusing on the procurement, marketing, and processing of products from individual and family farms. In 2024, the Ukrainian Agri Council expanded its membership by 232 new enterprises, bringing the total to over 1,300 agricultural enterprises nationwide. This growth reflects a collective effort to address industry challenges and protect farmers’ rights, even amid ongoing conflicts (UAC 2024).

- institutional and economic measures. Implementing tax incentives and other supportive measures to encourage the voluntary transformation of individual peasant farms into family farms. The Ukrainian government, in partnership with international organizations such as the EU and FAO, has implemented projects to support rural households and small-scale agricultural enterprises. A \$15.5 million EU-funded project aims to strengthen agricultural value chains in regions such as Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, Zakarpattia, and parts of Chernivetsi. This includes matching grants for on-farm investments and support for products with geographical indications (FAO 2023).

Most agricultural enterprises in Ukraine currently operate with outdated equipment. Increasing the quantity and quality of capital assets in the sector will facilitate timely and efficient agricultural operations using modern, environmentally safe

technologies, thereby improving labor productivity and rural incomes.

Adequate material and technical support, land consolidation, promotion of shared use of agricultural machinery, and support for the development of mechanized services will contribute to reducing the capital intensity of agricultural enterprises. Therefore, material and technical support should become the next priority area for rural development.

Agricultural policies for sustainable rural development should aim to create a competitive, resource-efficient, and energy-saving agroecosystem capable of adapting to external adverse factors and fully utilizing internal renewable resources. This involves:

- utilizing competitive regional technologies. Implementing resource- and energy-efficient agricultural production technologies tailored to specific regional conditions. To address water scarcity, especially in eastern Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk regions, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has distributed drip irrigation kits to small-scale farmers. These systems deliver water directly to plant roots, maximizing efficiency and crop productivity. For instance, pilot installations in these regions have successfully improved yields and income for participating farmers. Expanding such initiatives nationwide could bolster water conservation and agricultural sustainability (FAO 2018);

- natural resource reproduction. Emphasizing soil fertility enhancement through advanced cultivation methods, adjusted planting schedules, eco-friendly crop varieties, and species that adapt well to new growing seasons;

- optimizing agroecosystem models. Developing optimal agroecosystem models suited to specific economic, social, and soil-climatic conditions.

- focus on organic farming and biotechnology. Promoting organic farming principles and the use of biotechnologies. The Ukrainian state took huge steps in this direction. First of all, a new law on organic farming has been adopted in 2018 – the Law of Ukraine “On basic principles and requirements for organic production, circulation and labelling of organic products”. Furthermore, in August 2023 Law of Ukraine “On state regulation of genetic engineering activities and state control over the placing on the market of genetically modified organisms and products” was adopted by the Parliament of Ukraine. The adoption of these legal acts confirms Ukrainian movement in the direction of bridging gaps between legal regulation of organic farming and use of biotechnologies in Ukraine and other countries of the world.

A strategic priority should be enhancing the shared responsibility of agribusinesses for the social development of rural areas, preserving biodiversity, and rational natural resource usage. This necessitates forming an effective monitoring and control system for the utilization and protection of the rural environment.

State policy aimed at ensuring sustainable socio-economic development of rural areas must be comprehensive, grounded in a systematic approach. It should be closely interlinked with agricultural, agro-industrial, fiscal, foreign economic, institutional, and food policies, as well as initiatives related to food quality, population nutrition, and have clearly defined sources of funding and monitoring mechanisms within a specified timeframe. One notable example is the partnership initiated under the “Organic Trade for Development in Eastern Europe” (OT4D) program (IFOAM 2019). This project

supported organic farming in the Rivne region by training farmers and students, establishing educational resources, and setting up practical learning plots. The collaboration between government bodies, local businesses, and educational institutions highlights a replicable model for fostering sustainable agriculture and rural empowerment.

Further efforts include Ukraine's partnership with the UNDP to support the digitalization and green financing of agriculture (UNDP 2022). This initiative promotes climate-smart technologies, low-carbon farming, and ESG-aligned investments, helping align Ukraine's agricultural practices with EU and international environmental standards. Additionally, the project "Promoting Sustainable Livestock Management and Ecosystem Conservation in Northern Ukraine", supported by the Global Environment Facility, introduced sustainable livestock management on degraded peatlands, combining ecosystem restoration with innovative practices like paludiculture (UNDP 2023). These actions, supported by targeted state funding and digital monitoring systems, show how a structured, multi-stakeholder approach can yield tangible outcomes in sustainability and rural development.

International experience indicates that the socio-economic development level of any country is often reflected in the condition of its rural areas. In developed countries, for example Germany, rural communities benefit from strong infrastructure, accessible healthcare, and economic diversification. A study on German rural municipalities highlights how comprehensive sustainability policies across ecological, social, and technological dimensions contribute significantly to national development (KARAMI & MADLENER 2023). Similarly, Japan has invested heavily in rural revitalization strategies to combat depopulation, aiming to make countryside living more attractive for younger generations. These policies, while varied in success, illustrate the government's recognition of rural vitality as central to long-term national growth (ZOLLET & MENG Qu 2024).

Conversely, in developing countries, rural underdevelopment often reflects broader socio-economic challenges. In Brazil, rural regions—particularly remote municipalities—struggle with limited access to healthcare and essential services, reinforcing inequality and slowing national progress (ALMEIDA *et al.* 2022). India offers an example of proactive rural policy through Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGA), a rural employment guarantee scheme which has improved income security and social inclusion for millions (PARLIAMENT OF INDIA 2005). Meanwhile, countries like Ethiopia, despite showing gradual improvement in HDI, still face persistent rural development gaps that hinder broader economic and social advancement (HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT OFFICE 2020). These global examples underline a clear pattern: the condition of rural areas is not only a reflection of a nation's current development but also a critical factor in its future prosperity.

Many experts attribute this to the inability to achieve comprehensive state development without enhancing the resource potential of the agricultural sector. For example, the World Bank emphasizes that agriculture can significantly reduce poverty, raise incomes, and improve food security for 80% of the world's poor, who live in rural areas and work mainly in farming (WORLD BANK 2023b). At the same time, as it

stated in scientific circles, agriculture plays a pivotal role in transforming economies, achieving essential development goals like ensuring food security and improving nutrition. It is asserted that to end hunger and undernutrition while accelerating economic growth, agricultural transformation must become a reality (LIN 2018).

Recognizing this, governments of economically developed countries, such as the USA, Canada, Australia, the EU member states, and Japan, strive to establish effective mechanisms for rural development and promote rural traditions and lifestyles.

China's recent success in rural development demonstrates that large-scale economic reforms should begin with the agricultural sector. This approach can provide a significant impetus for rural development, driving growth in labor productivity, employment, income levels, local budgets, and overall quality of life. Additionally, it helps address food security issues, reduces social tensions, and mitigates economic, organizational, and political risks.

For instance, China implemented the Household Responsibility System in the late 1970s, which gave individual farmers control over land-use rights and allowed them to sell surplus produce in the market (LIN 1987). This drastically improved productivity and rural incomes. In more recent years, the Targeted Poverty Alleviation Campaign (launched in 2013) identified specific households in poverty and directed resources and training to them, lifting nearly 100 million people out of poverty (XIE 2021). Furthermore, programs like "Beautiful Countryside" initiatives have focused on improving rural infrastructure, sanitation, and environmental quality, enhancing the overall standard of living. These strategies also helped ensure food security, reduced social tensions, and mitigated economic and political risks, setting a replicable example for other developing nations. By implementing such diversified and comprehensive policies, Ukraine can lay a solid foundation for the sustainable development of its rural areas, enhance the socio-economic well-being of its rural population, and ensure long-term national stability and growth. To achieve diversified and comprehensive rural development, Ukraine must adopt a multi-pronged strategy that draws from both international best practices and its unique domestic context. The path to success lies in strengthening its agricultural resource base, modernizing infrastructure, and building institutional capacity, all while ensuring inclusivity and environmental sustainability.

The achievements of China, the European Union, the United States, and Japan in the field of agricultural diversification are regarded by numerous researchers as evidence of the necessity to analyze rural areas from the perspective of their multifunctionality. In this regard, multifunctional development should include the activation of non-agricultural functions of rural areas, thereby transforming them into agro-industrial service hubs.

A World Bank analysis indicates that agribusiness has the highest short-term indirect employment impact, where creating one job generates more than double the number of jobs in the rest of the economy, depending on the country's income level (SCHUMAN 2017). The successful resolution of issues related to multifunctional and sustainable development of rural areas is possible only through the establishment of a capable institution of local self-governance. This institution ensures a balance of power vertically, i.e., the rational allocation of competencies, resources, and responsibilities across different levels of governance

Another prerequisite for successfully addressing this issue is the creation of favorable conditions for the development of small enterprises in rural areas. Furthermore, European, Chinese, and American experiences in rural development suggest the establishment of social infrastructure that meets modern requirements and enhances the quality of life of the population.

Thus, the development of rural areas is the result of the combined efforts of government bodies, entrepreneurs, and the local population. Government authorities provide overall management, formulate development programs, and offer financial support for specific projects. The strengthening of entrepreneurial structures results in increased tax revenues, growth in employment, and income levels of citizens, as well as the resolution of social issues (either on a voluntary basis or compelled by the need to improve the company's image and the quality of life of its employees). Unfortunately, in Ukraine, none of the prerequisites for rural development have been realized, the experience of developed countries has not been adequately implemented, and the substantial potential of Ukrainian rural areas continues to decline.

We can state that the rural development in Ukraine has been hindered by the absence of key foundational elements such as effective government support, active entrepreneurship, and community engagement. To support its evolution, several improvements could be made. Building strong public-private partnerships can channel investment into infrastructure and services, while international cooperation can provide valuable expertise and funding. Additionally, investing in training and capacity building for entrepreneurs and local officials would enhance skills and promote sustainable development. Policy reforms that offer financial incentives and easier access to credit could stimulate local economic activity. Engaging communities in planning processes and leveraging digital technologies for agriculture, education, and business can further drive progress. Together, these initiatives can create a more dynamic and resilient rural sector in Ukraine.

CONCLUSION

Ukraine possesses significant agricultural potential, and the ongoing decentralization aims to create additional opportunities for rural development and the establishment of capable rural territorial communities that will become subjects of a new European paradigm of rural development. However, the extent to which these opportunities are utilized depends on the activity of rural residents and their productive interaction with state authorities, representatives of the agricultural business sector, local self-government, and the search for compromise solutions.

The advantages of decentralization for rural development lie in the fact that decisions regarding public expenditures are made at the local level, thus reflecting the local needs of the population. Consequently, such expenditures are more likely to address local service needs than decisions made at the central level. Another outcome of this process is that citizens demonstrate a greater willingness to pay for services that align with their priorities, particularly when they have been involved in the decision-making process regarding the provision of such services. Therefore, the implementation of a diversification mechanism for the development of rural areas under the conditions of decentralization can enhance the quality of life for rural

populations, ensure the competitiveness of rural areas, and achieve environmental security.

Ukraine can achieve sustainable rural development and long-term national stability by implementing a diversified strategy that prioritizes agricultural modernization, infrastructure development, and social inclusion. Strengthening the agricultural sector – through investments in modern technologies, sustainable practices, and access to finance for small and medium farmers – will unlock the full resource potential of rural areas. Enhancing market access, supporting agri-tech education, and promoting public-private partnerships will further boost productivity and rural incomes.

In parallel, Ukraine must invest in upgrading rural infrastructure such as transport, energy, and digital connectivity, while also improving essential services like healthcare, education, and vocational training. Empowering local governance structures and ensuring transparent land ownership reforms will promote inclusive decision-making and investment confidence. Aligning rural development policies with European standards and leveraging international donor support will help Ukraine build resilient, vibrant rural communities – laying a solid foundation for broader socio-economic growth and national cohesion.

NOTES

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization, methodology, and formal analysis, Oleksii Lialiuk and Tetiana Lisova; software and validation, Svitlana Sharapova and Viktoriia Bredikhina; investigation, Oleksii Lialiuk and Tetiana Lisova; resources and data curation, Svitlana Sharapova and Viktoriia Bredikhina; writing-original draft preparation, Svitlana Sharapova and Viktoriia Bredikhina; writing-review and editing, Svitlana Sharapova and Viktoriia Bredikhina; visualization, Svitlana Sharapova and Viktoriia Bredikhina; supervision, Tetiana Lisova; project administration, Svitlana Sharapova and Viktoriia Bredikhina; funding acquisition, Oleksii Lialiuk and Tetiana Lisova. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

FUNDING

This work was not supported by any funding agency.

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD STATEMENT

Not applicable for studies not involving humans or animals.

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

Not applicable because this study did not involve humans.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data can be made available under request.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are no acknowledgments.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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