



END-OF-PROJECT CONFERENCE OF THE TRANS-RURAL PROJECT

***“Trans-Rural: Flexible Learning for Rural Businesses”***

ATHENS  
6 SEPTEMBER 2005

*Panel discussion: Lifelong learning and sustainable rural development*

**Access to Lifelong Learning and the Role of ICT**

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**Introduction**

The educational packages produced in the context of the EURACADEMY project were used for the delivery of a pilot training programme in Poland by the local project team from Nicolaus Copernicus University. The University staff tried by means of ICT (mainly distance learning) to provide rural people, particularly those working in small and medium-sized businesses, with information on the principles of sustainable rural development. The experience showed that, on the one hand, our activities had attracted growing interest amongst the beneficiaries, and on the other hand, that there are considerable restrictions in the use of ICT, particularly in those European regions where they are most needed, i.e. Central and Eastern Europe.

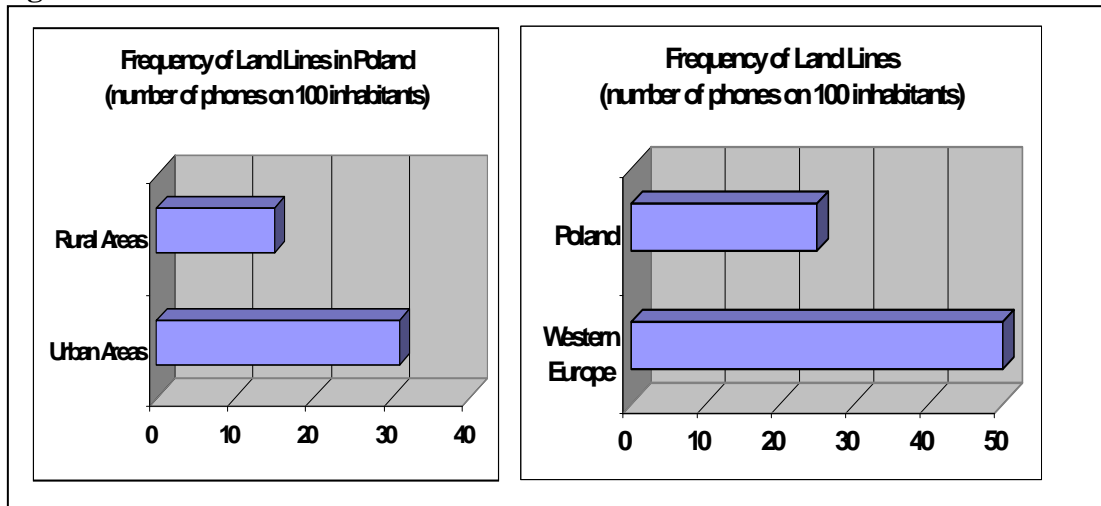
Through constant monitoring of the effectiveness of the training activities organised in Poland, as well as through my own discussions in Hungary and more recently in Romania (April 2005), it follows that the inhabitants of this part of Europe continue to face severe restrictions in respect to the access to lifelong learning supported by ICT. These are mainly due to technical, financial and cultural barriers both in the use of ICT as well as issues of accessibility, especially prevalent in rural areas. In the rest of this paper, this discussion will be illustrated with data from Poland.

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**The first barrier appears to be poor infrastructure, i.e. narrow bandwidth and poor quality telecommunication network.**

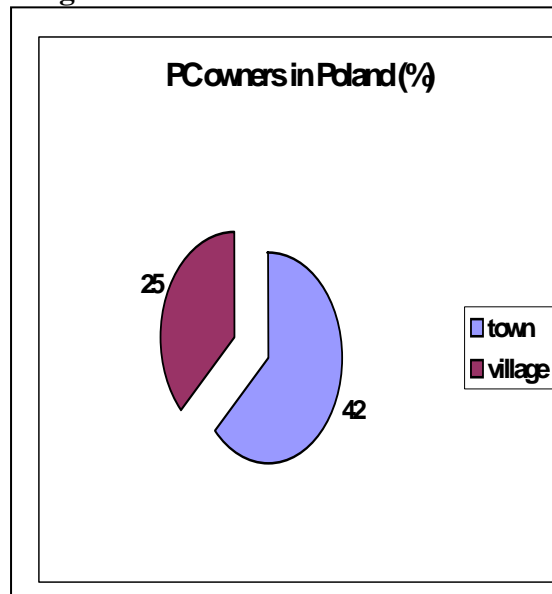
In Poland only about 15% of rural inhabitants are connected with telecommunication land lines (see diagram 1) and consequently have access to the internet (see diagrams 2 and 3). This means that our lifelong learning offer can theoretically only be directed to approximately 2 million out of the 15 million Polish rural inhabitants; this number is further reduced from the low bandwidth in the majority of telephone connections in rural areas, thus preventing for technical reasons either access to the internet or causing delay in transmitting information (something that occurs most frequently)<sup>1</sup>.

**Diagram no 1**



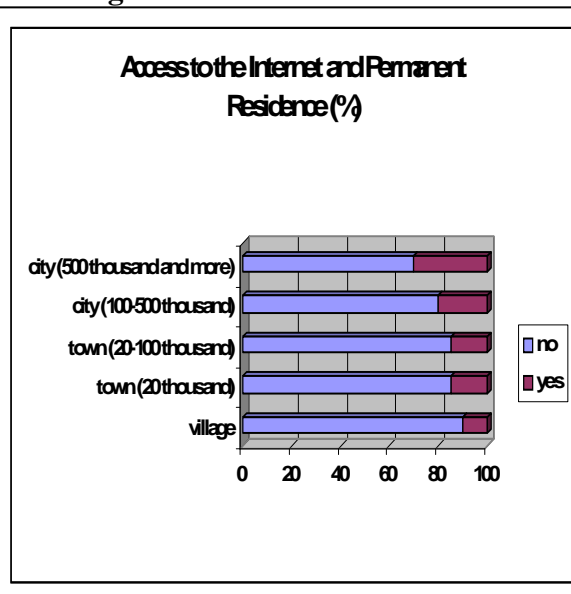
Source: Z. Kotowski, R. Kotowski, R. Woodward, *Teleinformatyka w edukacji polskiej wsi* (Telematics in the Education of Polish Village), manuscript prepared for CASE Foundation

**Diagram no 2**



Source: Central Statistic Office, 2004

**Diagram no 3**

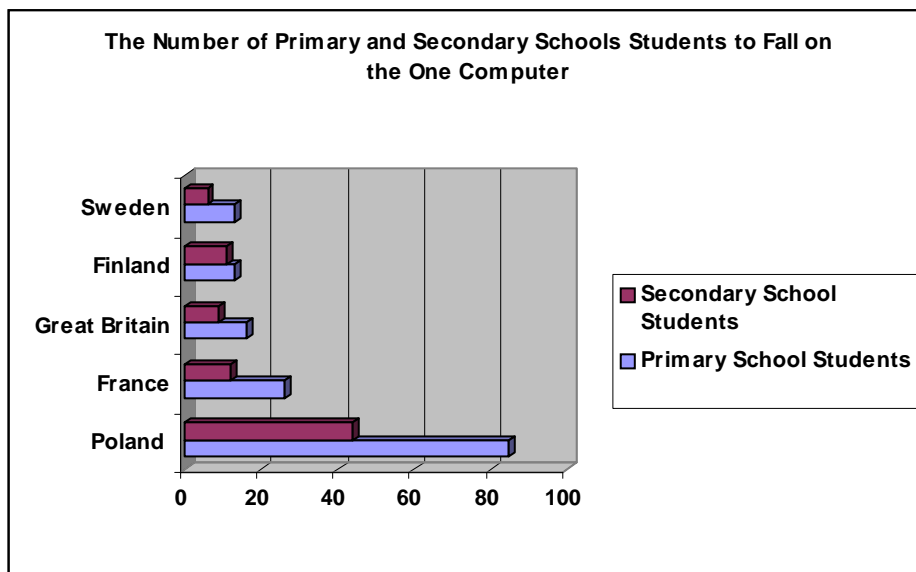


Source: [www.waw.org.pl/eeurope/e-europe.html](http://www.waw.org.pl/eeurope/e-europe.html)

<sup>1</sup> The transmission of information on a 2MB computer connected to the internet with 9-12 KB/sec. capacity (most land line rural subscribers have them) will prolong transmission time to almost 30 minutes.

This inconvenience results in a significant raise in the cost of using the internet, which the average rural inhabitant cannot afford given also the considerable difficulty they have in paying standard telephone bills (this will later be discussed in more detail). Under the circumstances, we should not be surprised by the fact that 30% of the participants (mainly the rural intelligentsia) of the first Polish lifelong learning initiative supported by ICT, who owned a computer, as well as the remaining 70% of participants who did not, mainly used computers in schools as they were provided free of charge to course participants (following a special agreement between the EURACADEMY and the local municipalities). Also, a few course participants, lacking high-level ICT skills, were unable to set up the configurations in their computers in order to connect to the distance learning platform. In addition, they could not afford telephone bills which would increase substantially by connecting through the telephone modem to the distance learning platform. In Poland, and I presume this is also the case in other Central and Eastern European countries, taking part in learning activities supported by ICT, only via computers installed in school computer laboratories does not seem to be adequate. This is because of the low number of ICT facilities offered in schools (see diagram 4), which does not suffice even for the pupils, thus making the hope that other rural inhabitants may also benefit an illusion.

**Diagram no 4**



Source: Z. Kotowski, R. Kotowski, R. Woodward, *Teleinformatyka w edukacji polskiej wsi* (Telematics in the Education of Polish Village), manuscript prepared for CASE Foundation

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Even greater barriers in accessing lifelong learning supported by ICT are created by the high prices of telecommunication services (see figure 1), which in Poland and other Central and Eastern European countries are significantly higher than in the old EU countries. In addition, Polish telephone and/or internet users get burdened with high costs while their incomes are equivalent to 25% of the incomes of subscribers of such services in Germany, France or Great Britain. Indeed, high telephone and internet charges are a real problem, resulting not only in restrictions in the use of telephone services but also in an increasing number of people having to give up their land lines. It is the case, that many subscribers choose to purchase instead a mobile

phone which, apart from the improvement in the service standards, allows for a more efficient control of telephone expenses (i.e. freedom to choose the type and price of card). However, mobile connections make the use of internet restrictive because of the enormous costs in this service (several times higher than those provided by the land line system).

**Figure no 1**  
**Telephone and Internet Charges of Land Line and Mobile Line {Monthly Average Income of one Member of a Rural Family is 483 PLN (120 Euro)}**

Type of service	Type of Line	Cost of 60 minutes + VAT	% on relation to the monthly income
Telephone connection (modem)	Land Line NETIA	7 PLN	1,4
ISDN	Land Line NETIA	7 PLN	1,4
Packet 'Lump payment for 100 minutes'	Land Line NETIA	8 PLN	1,6
Telephone connection (modem)	Land Line TPSA	7 PLN	1,4
ISDN	Land Line TPSA	7 PLN	1,4
Neostrada (no limited time)	Land Line TPSA	119 PLN – 291,58 PLN (cost depends on connection capacity)	24,6-60,3
Packet '5 hours per month'	Land Line TPSA	2,41 PLN	0,4%
'Blue Connect' per month	ERA GSM	128,78 PLN	26,6

Source: Own calculations based on: L. Klank, Income Differentiation of the Polish Farmers, in: Eastern European Countryside 2005/10 and data collecting by Iwona Leśniewicz in TPSA and NETIA

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### **Other barriers caused by culture and mentality**

On top of technical and financial barriers in using the internet for education, there are also cultural and mental barriers, stemming from low awareness of the advantages of the Information Society. Politicians and businessmen in Polish rural regions are yet not convinced or aware of the multiple benefits the participation in the Information Society may bring to rural areas; those who favour ICT, compare the need for improving ICT infrastructure to basic welfare services such as access to clean water or to a doctor.

Moreover, rural inhabitants, as well as local government representatives and rural entrepreneurs, have not yet realised that modern ICT infrastructure and equipment can significantly improve the quality of work and life, providing enhanced opportunities for getting better employment and income. An unfortunate fact is also that the involvement of Polish schools in ICT is very limited. This is not surprising given that barely 12-13% of teachers have completed ICT courses (a figure significantly lower in rural areas), compared with 50-80% of the teaching staff in the old EU countries<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, it appears that involving rural communities, businesses and school teachers (who may act as mediators with rural community members) in projects such as EURACADEMY, which presented concrete examples of the benefits accrued to the participation in the Information Society, is very important.

<sup>2</sup> POLITYKA-INTERNET, Polityka supplement no. 36 (2261), 2 September 2000.