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## A Framework for Modern Rural Policy in Poland – Dialogue with the Research Community

**Abstract:** Rural development in Poland has excelled at a rapid pace since EU accession. Much has been achieved. Going forward, rural policies will need to maintain this momentum, address some of the most intractable policy problems, such as persistent pockets of poverty, and ensure that growth and prosperity is experienced in all regions. Poland's research community has and should continue to play a pivotal role in addressing these issues. This article follows on the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) 2018 Rural Policy Review of Poland. It provides a brief summary of the main findings of this study and the conceptual framework which guided it and proposes four main lessons (and challenges) for research community.

**Keywords:** OECD, rural development, community development, research, Poland, rural policy.

### 1. Introduction

What constitute modern rural development policies for Poland? Given the rapid pace of rural development since accession to the European Union, how can Poland continue to propel this trajectory forward? How can it ensure that the country's growth and prosperity is experienced in all regions? The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) 2018 *Rural Policy Review of Poland* tackled just these questions. This work was grounded in the OECD's framework for rural development – Rural Policy 3.0 – but adapted to the specificities of rural Poland. The resulting report offered 24 policy recommendations across four main themes.

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The opinions of the author do not necessarily represent the official views of the OECD or of its member countries. The opinions expressed and arguments employed are those of the author.

While these recommendations were predominantly directed towards the national government, their implementation will require the involvement of regional and local governments and a host of other actors across the public and private sectors – including the research community. It is on this last point that this article focuses – the role of the research community in supporting a framework for modern rural policy in Poland.

The article proceeds as follows: i) a brief summary of the framework conditions for rural development in Poland; ii) a description of the OECD's conceptual framework for rural development and how it has evolved and; iii) the *Rural Policy Review of Poland's* main recommendations along with four main lessons (and challenges) for research community.

## 2. Framework conditions for rural development

### 2.1. Poland's rural regions have experienced remarkable growth and improved living conditions – but these outcomes are uneven

A starting point for this discussion is an examination of the framework conditions for rural development. The overarching trends over the past three decades indicate a remarkable transformation. Poland's growth in GDP per capita in rural regions has been among the highest of the OECD's rural regions.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the income of rural households has increased; the economy has diversified; and rural living conditions have improved significantly, as has rural infrastructure (e.g. roads, sewage). These are great achievements.

However, challenges remain. Poland's rural economy is characterised by a strong but decreasing dependency on the agricultural sector, where average productivity is relatively low. This low productivity is due to a combination of factors, including very limited land consolidation in some parts of the country and the dominance of small farms, as well as hidden unemployment in agriculture. Polish exports are dominated by goods with low value added; the majority of Polish export products are classified as middle processed goods. On average, rural regions have not been catching up to intermediate and predominantly urban ones in terms of GDP per capita, despite high growth. Regional disparities in economic and social outcomes in Poland are large by OECD standards and while the labour productivity of rural areas has converged to national standards, this has accompanied employment decline. The living conditions of rural communities remain below urban standards;

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<sup>1</sup> The OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) (est. 1961) is a forum in which governments can work together to share experiences and seek solutions to common problems. There are 36 member countries as of October 2018.

rural regions have lower rates of educational attainment and peripheral areas continue to have poorer infrastructure.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, despite improvements between 2015 and 2016, poverty rates remain high (particularly among farmers) and children and women in rural areas continue to face the highest degree of economic and social marginalisation (Karwacki 2006; Tarkowska 2008; Tarkowska and Korzeniewska 2002). Rural regions continue to have considerably lower rates of educational attainment than their urban counterparts (OECD 2016a).

In some rural regions, territorial disparities risk becoming entrenched. While rural communities that are closer to cities tend to have more diversified economies, a more robust labour market and better access to services, peripheral regions face a very different set of conditions. Some areas face multigenerational poverty, such as the areas of former state-owned farms in northwestern Poland. These areas experience a lack of industry and financial capital, low rates of educational attainment, youth outmigration, high elderly dependency ratios and limited public services. As Polish academics have long pointed out, Poland's territorial heterogeneity is in part attributable to historical path dependencies. Standards of living tend to be higher and economic performance stronger, in western Poland, which has been historically influenced by western Europe and Germany. Meanwhile, eastern regions, which have been historically influenced by Imperial Russia, face lower standards of living. These disparities extend to such factors as different levels of social capital and trust.

This brief discussion of Poland's framework conditions for rural development paints a diverse picture. It serves to highlight the importance of place-based policies both from the perspective of how the national and regional governments design and deliver programmes and public investments. It also speaks to the capacity of rural communities (*gminas*) and other local institutional actors such as non-governmental organisations to facilitate an endogenous bottom-up development processes. Moreover, emphasizes the need for Poland to move beyond its current reliance on low-wage workers and shift production of low technology goods to more advanced ones; generate more value in goods and services; and improve the enabling factors for growth (e.g. skills, innovation, accessibility and connectivity, and governance).

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<sup>2</sup> Please note that "rural regions" are based on the OECD's regional typology. This typology classifies two levels of geographic units within each member country: 1) large regions (TL2), which generally represent the first administrative tier of subnational government; and 2) small regions (TL3). TL3 regions are classed as predominantly urban (PU), intermediate (IN) and predominantly rural (PR) on the basis of population density and size. Rural regions are further differentiated between those that are close to a city and those that are remote, depending on the driving distance to major regional centres.

### 3. The OECD's rural development framework – Rural 3.0

#### 3.1. Rural areas are places of opportunity

The OECD has long advocated for a territorial approach to rural development. In 2006, OECD member countries articulated and endorsed the conceptual framework that guides this work. Termed the 'New Rural Paradigm', this framework positioned rural policy as an investment strategy to promote competitiveness in rural territories. This represented a radical departure from the typical subsidy programmes of the past aimed at specific sectors – notably agriculture. Today, most OECD countries recognise that rural policy has moved beyond farming and they now define a broader set of issues and activities as being central to rural development. Poland's rural policies have evolved over the past three decades from an initial focus on agricultural production towards a broader recognition of rural areas as places with a diversity of economic, cultural and environmental functions.

Since 2006, the OECD has engaged with a number of member countries to conduct rural policy reviews in order to gauge how existing rural policies in each country conforms with the principles of the New Rural Paradigm and to offer advice on how to reform those policies to make them more effective. This policy advice is based on evolving academic and practitioner research and on the identification of effective rural policies in member countries. In 2016, the New Rural Paradigm was updated with the Rural Policy 3.0, which reflects knowledge acquired in the intervening decade (OECD 2016b). This builds upon the New Rural Paradigm with the intention of moving it from a "paradigm" towards more specific policy recommendations that can help countries with policy implementation.

Substantively, the Rural Policy 3.0 shifts the objectives of rural policy from a focus on the competitiveness of rural areas, towards wellbeing across its multiple dimensions (economic, social and environmental). The policy focus underpinning the Rural Policy 3.0 is that rural growth processes takes place in a "low-density economy" where agglomeration effects are absent and distance plays an important role in production costs and shapes peoples' lives. Because the opportunities and constraints in different types of rural places vary, so do their economic functions. Rural economies tend to have niche markets because they are small and specialised, except for those places producing natural resources, such as agricultural commodities, minerals or forest products. Table 1 illustrates the evolution of the OECD's thoughts on rural policy.

**Table 1.** Rural Policy 3.0

	<b>Old paradigm</b>	<b>New Rural Paradigm (2006)</b>	<b>Rural Policy 3.0: Implementing the New Rural Paradigm</b>
Objectives	Equalisation	Competitiveness	Well-being across multiple dimensions: environmental, economic, social and cultural.
Policy focus	Support for a single dominant resource sector	Support for multiple sectors based on their competitiveness	Low-density economies differentiated by type of rural area
Tools	Subsidies for firms	Investments in qualified firms and communities	Integrated rural development approach – spectrum of support to public sector, firms and third sector
Key actors and stakeholders	Farm organisations and national governments	All levels of government and all relevant departments plus local stakeholders	Involvement of: 1) public sector – multi-level governance; 2) private sector – forprofit firms and social enterprise; 3) third sector – non-governmental organisations and civil society
Policy approach	Uniformly applied topdown policy	Bottom-up policy, local strategies	Integrated approach with multiple policy domains
Rural definition	Not urban	Rural as a variety of distinct types of place	Three types of rural: 1) within a functional urban area; 2) close to a functional urban area; 3) far from a functional urban area

Source: OECD (2016b). *Rural Policy 3.0*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264260245-7-en> [accessed: 28.12.2018].

The OECD's advice for rural policy implementation is fairly abstract, reflecting the variability in regional conditions and national objectives. The value of the approach remains its potential to apply a coherent analytical framework to thinking about rural policy. Because the OECD policy framework emphasises the importance of a bottom-up approach and the inherent diversity of rural areas, national governments have to be willing to engage in joint development strategies with local counterparts. It is only through this process that specific policies are developed. While this approach bears higher transaction costs, due to the large number of stakeholders involved and also requires more information about available investment opportunities at the subnational level, it has proven potential to foster more resilient rural development that is strongly linked to community strengths and aspirations. For the research community, it provides an anchor for which to deconstruct or critique the approach or to further extend the conceptual framework, as the case may be.

#### 4. Developing a modern rural policy for Poland – advice (and challenges) to the research community

The research underpinning the OECD's *Rural Policy Review of Poland* took place over a period of two years and benefitted greatly from engagement with a number of Polish academics and research institutions, notably the Institute of Rural and Agricultural Development, Polish Academy of Sciences (IRWiR PAN).<sup>3</sup> The report provides 23 recommendations for national rural policy across four major themes (summarised in Table 2). The first area of recommendations focuses on modernising the agricultural sector. Farming activities are an important part of Poland's rural economy. In 2015, the share of employment in the primary sector (agriculture, forestry and fishing) was 11%; well above the OECD average of 5% (EC 2016). However, in terms of value added, the primary sector contributed just 2.4% in 2015 – which is a smaller contribution than other countries in the region with smaller shares of employment such as Hungary, the Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic (EC 2016). The OECD's recommendations here focus on aligning policy incentives to support smaller farms to grow, reduce hidden unemployment in the agricultural sector, and to enhance farm financial management practices.

The second main theme of the report's recommendations focus on support for economic diversification beyond agriculture and rural entrepreneurship. Here the report points to a need for balanced policies to support both agriculture and non-agricultural entrepreneurship, the need to enhance the rural innovation system alongside support for skills development and upgrading and supporting the development of export markets.

The third set of recommendations relates to the need for stronger incentives and frameworks for inter-municipal co-operation and integrated planning. Uncontrolled developments, particularity in peri-urban zones, have resulted in what Kowalewski et al. (2013) describe as “spatial chaos and a waste of space and capital”. Reforms to the spatial planning framework are needed. Moreover, while inter-municipal partnerships have the potential to, for example, build economics of scale in public investments and the delivery of services, their uptake has been slow to materialise – better policy incentives could help to counter this.

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<sup>3</sup> It entailed an extensive questionnaire answered by both the national government and other relevant actors (including members of IRDA); research interviews with over 200 participants over the course of three weeks across four regions of Poland (Małopolskie, Podlaskie, Wielkopolskie and Zachodniopomorskie); the participation of OECD country peer reviewers; and the extensive review of the final manuscript by 95 individuals representing various relevant Ministries of the national government, as well as the four participating regional governments, four foundations and IRDA. The final report was reviewed and approved by the Working Party on Rural Policy of the OECD.

**Table 2.** Main recommendations from the OECD 2018 *Rural Policy Review of Poland*

Main recommendations	Sub-recommendations
1. Align incentives and enhance support for the modernisation of agriculture in order to improve productivity and reduce rural poverty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide a more balanced policy framework suited for both small and large commercial farms.</li> <li>• Converge the farmers’ social insurance plan with the regular social security system over time and expand support for non-farm employment and economic activities.</li> <li>• Require small farms to file income tax returns and develop a more comprehensive set of farm financial statistics to improve agricultural policies.</li> <li>• Ensure that agricultural advisory services emphasise business and financial management practices and enhance farm financial management curriculum in agricultural schools.</li> <li>• Improve agricultural credit systems to help small farms with good agricultural potential to modernise and expand.</li> <li>• Revisit overly restrictive rules for the purchase of farmland and reduce excessive farm fragmentation to improve agricultural productivity and the natural environment.</li> </ul>
2. Enhance support for economic diversification and rural entrepreneurship.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase support for rural development outside of agriculture.</li> <li>• Strengthen the links between research institutions and rural enterprise.</li> <li>• Enhance skills upgrading and training for businesses, including more flexible and targeted educational opportunities.</li> <li>• Enhance the export capacity for small and medium-sized enterprises.</li> <li>• Ensure a stable and high-quality regulatory environment for investment.</li> </ul>
3. Establish stronger incentives and frameworks for inter-municipal co-operation and integrated planning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage inter-municipal co-ordination enabled in law and consider more flexible arrangements.</li> <li>• Strengthen incentives for rural-rural and rural-urban partnerships.</li> <li>• Increase incentives for local spatial development plans; reduce reliance on ad hoc planning decisions.</li> <li>• Capitalise on the existing network of national and regional territorial observatories to monitor spatial trends and lend technical expertise to municipalities (<i>gminas</i>).</li> <li>• Strengthen mechanisms and incentives for integrated and functional planning.</li> <li>• Strengthen regulations to protect high-quality agricultural land.</li> </ul>
4. Implementing the Strategy for Responsible Development requires stronger decentralisation and improved multi-level governance.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strengthen subnational governance capacity and deepen decentralisation.</li> <li>• Support local capacity building with enhanced data and territorial definitions.</li> <li>• Enhance strategies to combine EU and national/regional funds for rural development.</li> <li>• Choose appropriate targets to ensure that national objectives and standards are met.</li> <li>• Provide a stable operating environment for subnational governments.</li> <li>• Provide targeted interventions for distressed and marginalised areas within a multi-level governance framework.</li> <li>• Construct policies and programmes that are open to non-government organisations as well as private enterprise.</li> </ul>

Source: OECD (2018).

The final set of recommendations focus on Poland's new medium-term national strategy: the *Strategy for Responsible Development until 2020 with a Perspective to 2030*, SRD (adopted 14<sup>th</sup> February 2017). The strategy implies changes to Poland's development management system and defines a new model of development. Importantly, the SDR recognises institutional weakness as a major challenge to realising the country's development potential, including: the rigid control of central government procedures over the actions of subsidiary governments; excessive reliance on EU funds and programmes to define public policies; limited communication and co-ordination among state agencies; overlapping responsibility among ministries; and weak social capital in some regions that inhibits the collective action needed for locally based development activity.

The timing of the OECD's *Rural Policy Review of Poland* offered the chance to comment on how to structure multi-level governance and enhance regional and local capacity in support of the SDR. In the OECD's assessment, while the national government has shown an increased willingness to delegate authority, it has often not provided sufficient resources or autonomy in allocating them to lower levels of governments. Moreover, occasional centralising tendencies that run in the opposite direction – e.g. all national government and EU funding for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) has recently been centralised within the Prime Minister's Office; agricultural advisory centres have been transferred from *voivodeships* to the national government; and the Agricultural Markets Association has increased control over producers groups. The OECD's recommendations here focus on strengthening the multi-level governance framework across the policy system – and adopting a mixed approach that on the one hand, supports bottom up development processes and local capacity building, while on the other, provides a higher level of targeted supports in interventions in those areas that are most marginalised and at risk of entrenched poverty.

These recommendations were subject to a robust peer review by both the national government, the four participating regions, rural foundations/NGOs and IRWiR PAN as well as the regular country peer review by committee that is used in the adoption of all OECD reports.<sup>4</sup> It is hoped that these recommendations and accompanying discussion on rural development will prove useful in assisting the national government implement the goals of the SDR in rural Poland. For the research community, it is hoped that the report will be used to spark discussion among Polish researchers on potential directions for rural policy. Beyond this,

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<sup>4</sup> The foundations involved were the Foundation of Assistance Programmes for Agriculture; the Foundation for the Development of Polish Agriculture; the European Fund for Development of Polish Rural Areas; and the Polish Rural Forum.



the report points to several areas where researchers can fill important literature gaps and inform policy debates. The remainder of this article highlights four key areas where researchers might focus their efforts: i) defining rural areas, ii) taking a broad view of rural policies, iii) investigating leadership and social capital, and iv) supporting rural innovation.

#### 4.1. Rural definitions and mapping functional relationships for rural policy

A fundamental starting point of rural policy is to define what rural is – the parameters for how this geography is understood and delineated. The geographical lens through which policy issues are bound impacts how they are acted upon and the types of policy interventions that are proposed. Rural areas can have a wide range of characteristics and functions and as such, multiple definitions may be needed, depending of the phenomenon being studied and the nature of the policy intervention. While administrative definitions are always important as the locus of government actions, functional relationships matter greatly too – and policy instruments are increasingly encouraged along these lines.

The OECD report highlights the limitation of the current Polish TERYT typology, namely that the initial classification of *gminas* (LAU2) relies on qualitative criteria with no differentiation among different types of rural. It encourages Poland to consider revisiting its rural classification, embracing a nuanced understanding of mixed *gminas* in order to improve the understanding of how territories function with urban and rural counterparts. Finland, Italy and Sweden offer but a few examples of how rural definitions can be adopted for different policy purposes.

- Finland launched a new definition in 2013 based on spatial data (250 m<sup>2</sup> grid cells) and analyses territories based on multiple variables which are organised into seven regional types.
- Italy has adopted territorial classifications that recognise its polycentric character. Within Italy's new policy for territorial cohesion – the “Inner Areas” policy – the national territory has been classified into six types of regions based on access to services in order to better address specific regional issues.
- Sweden's classification is based on population in grid cells of 1 km<sup>2</sup> in order to calculate the rural and non-rural population in a municipality and different threshold values in order to determine a municipality's classification.

A need for revised rural definitions is something well recognised by Polish academics. Moreover, reports such as the *Socio-Economic Development of Rural Areas in Poland* (Rosner and Stanny 2017) contain detailed geographic analysis on a wide range of variables that depict functional relationships. A key question for the Polish research community is how these types of analyses can be used to

inform the design and delivery of public policies (programmes and investments). How can both national and regional policy makers and rural communities use them to deliver better outcomes?

A related question is how the research community might work with Poland's Regional Territorial Observatories in order to shape this work. As the report notes, the territorial observatories were created to evaluate and monitor regional policy and the observatories' forums convene public authorities, scientists and experts to improve spatial planning processes. They are a repository of data and information on spatial trends. The Regional Territorial Observatories could be used more effectively to support rural land-use planning. Rather than just reporting up, these observatories could serve to enhance the analytical capacities of local communities themselves, in order to promote, for example, urban-rural partnerships. They are well placed to serve a wider function – one that supports endogenous development and capacity building.

#### 4.2. Taking a broad view of rural policies

What are rural policies? Are they just those that identify as such, or should one, in the construction of modern rural policies for Poland, consider the host government policies and supports that have territorial impacts? The OECD has taken a broad view on this question within its work, mapping out the range of policies that impact rural development, from broad social and fiscal policies to ones that are targeted to place. This has included for example:

Social policies such as the “Family 500+” programme, which can have a greater impact in rural areas where incomes are lower and the financial incentives that that programme creates are thus greater.

- Labour market policies such as the lowering of the statutory retirement age in late 2017 that may disproportionately lower rural labour market participation (due to a higher concentration of senior residents).
- Education and healthcare policies that have unintended spatial consequences such as regulations about school size and facilities which can lead to larger schools at greater distances in rural areas.
- Environmental policies, such as the protection of watersheds and forests, that can disproportionately impact rural areas since they constitute the largest share of land in the country.
- Transport policies which impact rural accessibility.

Rural policies extend much beyond those that are labelled as “rural”. A territorial lens on such overarching policies can help ensure that they are not spatial blind to their consequences. Given this, a challenge to the research community is to take

a comprehensive view of the many policies that impact rural areas (intentionally or otherwise), mapping the incentives that they set for actors across all scales – national, regional and local.

#### 4.3. Investigating leadership and social capital

It has often been remarked that Poland has a weak civil society and third sector stemming from both the legacy of the socialist era and from the large population movements that Poland experienced in the 20th century, leading to areas with less-established social bonds. The EU's LEADER programmes have supported the development of third sector organisations and championing local leadership more generally; this programme has led to a growth of newly established third-sector organisations (Furmankiewicz, Janc and Macken-Walsh 2016). However, overall, civic engagement in strategy building remains relatively weak (Furmankiewicz, Janc and Macken-Walsh 2016; Przewłocka 2011). As noted by Furmankiewicz and Macken-Walsh (2016), “professional dependency, tokenism and clientelism, impede the realisation of governance processes”.

In the course of research interviews conducted for the Rural Policy Review of Poland, effective local leadership – both within local government and third sector organisations – was repeatedly highlighted as one of the key factors underpinning a community's successful economic and social development. Indeed, research by Antolak et al. (2017) indicates that funds in the LEADER programme tend to accrue to places where there is effective leadership (and not necessarily where the money is most needed). This raises the importance of sociological research in order to better understand how local leadership can be fostered, but moreover, how to enhance civic engagement in rural development more generally. A question to the research community is how to better understand the role of local leadership and rural development and the relationship between such leadership and social capital (including trust).

#### 4.4. Fostering rural innovation

In general, innovation activities in Polish rural areas tend to be weak. Investments in research and development are related to innovation activities. Agricultural activities predominate but opportunities for conducting related R&D activities are limited, contributing to the low economic strength of agricultural activities. Larger farms are much more likely than smaller ones to engage in R&D and innovation activities.

Innovation is often captured by investments in formal science that rely on research institutions, such as universities and national government and corporate

laboratories, and success is typically measured in terms of patents. However, many rural areas lack innovation by this standard because they are not the home to the major research institutions or corporate headquarters that undertake and register the results of patent-producing science. A broader understanding of innovation – one that includes not just new practices or behaviours but also improvements to existing practices and technologies – can provide a better representation of how rural innovation occurs and its importance to rural economies. Unfortunately, there is limited data to capture such dynamics. The literature on rural innovation has pointed out the importance of local knowledge (often tacit and implicit), expert knowledge (often more explicit and formalised) and the support of networks to rural innovation (Esparcia 2014). Therefore, a challenge to the research community is to develop new ways in which to map and understand rural innovation and in doing so, enhance the design of policies that may more effectively propel it.

## 5. Conclusions

This article has briefly shared the main thrust of the OECD's analysis on rural policy in Poland, outlined its general framework for rural development (Rural 3.0) and discussed some specific research issues (and challenges) that the academic community may wish to explore in this conversation on modern rural policies in Poland. Poland has a very rich landscape of rural research which has informed public policy. The country's rural transformation has been impressive – and yet, some intractable problems remain, notably, the persistence of multi-generational poverty in marginalised areas. Tackling these issues requires a broad view of rural policy which draws on a multiple disciplines to understand rural conditions, livelihoods and wellbeing. Moreover, it demands normativity – with the research community elaborating not just on “what is”, but “*what ought to be*”.

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## Ramy nowoczesnej polityki wiejskiej w Polsce – dialog ze społecznością naukową

**Streszczenie:** Od czasu przystąpienia Polski do Unii Europejskiej polska wieś rozwija się w wyjątkowo wysokim tempie. Wiele udało się w tym czasie osiągnąć. W dalszej perspektywie polityki wiejskiej w Polsce będą musiały utrzymać tę dynamikę, rozwiązywać najtrudniejsze problemy, takie jak występujące wciąż obszary ubóstwa, oraz zapewnić wzrost i dobrobyt we wszystkich regionach kraju. Polska społeczność naukowa odgrywa i nadal powinna odgrywać kluczową rolę w rozwiązywaniu tych problemów. Niniejszy artykuł kontynuuje dyskusję dotyczącą kształtu polityki rozwoju obszarów wiejskich i przedstawia wnioski z „Przeglądu polityki wobec obszarów wiejskich w Polsce” opracowanego przez Organizację Współpracy Gospodarczej i Rozwoju (OECD) w 2018 r. Artykuł zawiera krótki opis koncepcji raportu, podsumowanie jego głównych wyników oraz cztery główne zalecenia (i wyzwania) dla społeczności naukowej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** OECD, rozwój obszarów wiejskich, rozwój społeczności lokalnych, badania naukowe, Polska, polityka rozwoju obszarów wiejskich.