

Proceedings of the 11th International Scientific Conference Rural Development 2023

Edited by assoc. prof. dr. Judita Černiauskiėnė

ISSN 1822-3230 (Print)
ISSN 2345-0916 (Online)

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15544/RD.2023.037>

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMICS ON SOCIAL ACTIVENESS OF POLISH FARMERS¹

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Covid-19 pandemic was undoubtedly a shock to the economies and societies worldwide. It caused changes in law regulations, human behaviour, and conditions for economic development. People reduced socialising and changed the forms of social life. This might have consequences for future networking and information sharing, which affects (among others) innovation adaptability and propensity to cooperate. The aim of this study was to assess the impact of the pandemic on social activeness of Polish farmers (in formal organisations and informal cooperation). Basing on 124 phone interviews with village administrators representative for all regions of Poland it was revealed, that in general the activeness decreased in the first year (with some exceptions), and the changes in the second year were not uniform. The number of organisations present in the villages did not change significantly, but their activeness was changing. The largest decline was visible in jointly selling agricultural products and in joint work for the common good of the village or NUTS 5 commune. The largest increase was visible in giving a lift to a shop, doctor, or nearest town and in doing everyday shopping.

Keywords: social activeness, farmers, COVID-19, Poland

INTRODUCTION

At the end of 2019 mass media started to inform about a new and dangerous virus that was discovered in China; this virus was called SARS-CoV-2 (ang. *severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2*) and caused COVID-19 disease. With time the disease was discovered also in other countries, causing anxiety among people and decision-makers, followed by various legal measures that were supposed to prevent its spreading. During the first months of the pandemic, when there was no vaccine available and the methods of curing were not known yet, minimising the spread of the virus was done mostly by limiting social contacts; this was supposed to reduce the risk of infection (Bai et al, 2020).

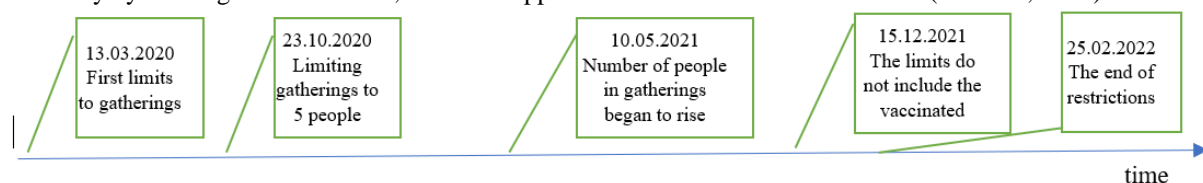


Figure 1. The most important changes in limiting gatherings by law regulations in Poland in connection to the COVID-19 pandemic (Łaskawski, 2022)

Legal regulations were changing according to the number of infections in respected country, vaccine accessibility, and curing methods. In Poland, first regulations connected to COVID-19 pandemic (including limiting the number of people in gatherings) were introduced in March 2020 (Figure 1.). Cinemas, museums, libraries, and sport objects were closed. Restaurants could offer only takeaway food. Few days later all gatherings were forbidden, but 2 weeks later they were allowed, but limited to 150 people. In summer, due to relatively low number of infections, there were no other restrictions introduced, but a growth in the number of infections in late September and October led to limiting gatherings to 5 people only. The limits became less restrictive since mid-May 2021, and since December 2021 people that were

¹ The publication is financed from the state budget under the project of the Ministry of Education and Science "Science for Society" No. Nds/532598/2021/2022. Funding amount PLN 290 950.00. The total value of the project is PLN 290 950.00 (Poland).

vaccinated were not included in the limits (thus there could be for example 50 unvaccinated people and an unlimited number of those vaccinated allowed to participate in a mass event). All the limits to gathering were lifted in February 2022 (Łaskawski, 2022).

Apart from official recommendations, many people voluntarily reduced their social contacts, to protect themselves or vulnerable others (small children, elderly and seriously ill people). This affected methods of work and education, social life, and forms of help. It is known that reduction of social life influences future cooperation (Kłoczko-Gajewska, 2020) (Putnam 2000), and that farmers quite often use conversations with other farmers as a source of information concerning their business. The basic aim of the research was to discover to what extent did the COVID-19 pandemic change intensity and manifestations of social activeness of Polish farmers, as it might have an effect on their future networking, information sharing, and cooperation.

TRADITIONAL FORMS OF SOCIAL ACTIVENESS IN POLISH RURAL AREAS

Before analysing current changes in social activeness of farmers it is good to have at least brief overview of its most popular forms. There are many forms of social activeness in Polish rural areas – some of them are modern, and some are based on the 19th century organisations, with many hybrid ones, as well. There are some considerable regional differences in the level of social activeness observed, where regions that are better-developed in social and economic sense are generally more active. However, there are also changes with time, so the path-dependency is not fully deterministic (Stanny et al., 2023). Many of them are used exclusively by farmers (if they are connected to farming), some are used by various types of rural citizens (which in the past times consisted mostly of farmers, but it was changing during last decades).

Among the most traditional formalised forms of farmers' cooperation, we can find farmers' circles, which began to emerge as long ago as in the 19th century. At that time their main goals were educating farmers (mostly concerning farming technology and innovations) and spreading patriotic knowledge (at that time Poland was not existing). Since the 1918, when Poland regained its independence, the main focus shifted to economic and technological development of family farmers. With a considerable downswing in their activeness in 1939-1956 due to WWII followed by implementing socialism², the farmers' circles were quite popular until 1989 (changes in their activeness in certain phases resulted from changes in law regulations). After that year, in the new political and economic situation, their activeness and popularity declined (Borkowski, 1978), (Kozuch, 1999).

Alongside with the farmers' circles a development of Rural Women's Circles was observed. Their main aim was to educate local community on basic healthcare, hygiene, and housekeeping, as well as to organise childcare in high farming season (Biejat, Wójcikowska, 2015). During most of the 20th century their popularity was rising and declining parallelly to the popularity of the farmers' circles (Borkowski, 1978), (Kozuch, 1999). It is estimated that in about ¾ of NUTS 5 communes in Poland there is a Rural Women's Circle, and if it exists, there are on average five of them – thus an existence of one increases the probability of creating another one. About 1/3 of them are registered as a member of Farmers' Circles Association, about half of them has no formal status. Currently their role is mostly concentrated on tradition and spending free time in an interesting way – mostly for middle-aged women (Biejat, Wójcikowska, 2015).

Another form of farmers' cooperation, this time connected with earning money, are cooperatives and producer groups. First cooperatives were formed on Polish territory in the 19th century, and since 1920, when proper law regulations were introduced, their number raised significantly. During socialist times Polish state authorities strongly supported creating cooperatives, but their autonomy was considerably reduced – this caused significant increase in their number, but decrease in the feeling of togetherness of their members (Bomba, 2013). The number of cooperatives significantly decreased since the transformation in the 1990s. A bit similar form of farmers' cooperation are producer groups, some of which take a form a cooperative. They can provide their members with such services as jointly buying inputs, jointly selling products, joint marketing, lobbying, etc. (Chlebicka et al.2009). There are also some other forms of self-organisation, such as farmers' trade unions, farmers' chambers, etc. , but they are of minor importance.

Among popular and important organisations, we can name Volunteer Fire Brigades. They consist of healthy and active people (mostly men) who, apart from their normal activeness (work, education), organise themselves to fight with fires, help victims of accidents, and quite often organise social life in their area. Volunteer fire brigades are not considered NGOs due to their hierarchical character, but they play an important role in rural social life in Poland, as they quite often organise social events. According to up-to-date data there are about 16 000 of them in Poland. It is a similar number to the number of associations and foundations (18 000) found in Polish rural areas.

Talking about social life in rural areas, it is important to mention community centres – places where various meetings and events are organised, from courses and parties to helping children in doing their homework. They have a long tradition, and some of them were built by the villagers themselves (Lewenstein, 1999), (Kłoczko-Gajewska, 2020).

In the 1990s many researchers described Polish rural areas as inactive due to a low number of organisations, compared to the towns and cities. However, informal cooperation of farmers was observed, including neighbourhood help (Wieruszewska, 2002). In the 20th century village inhabitants quite often cooperated to jointly build schools, small local shops, community centres, and other useful buildings. Most often they offered their own work and materials, sometimes also money (Lewenstein, 1999) (Raport o rozwoju, 2000).

² It should be remembered that in Poland during socialist times over 75% of agricultural land belonged to family farmers (Central Statistical Office, 2014).

RESEARCH METHODS

The pandemic changed the level of social activeness in many countries, forcing limiting certain methods of cooperation and implementing new ones. Thus, the research question was the following: how did the scope and forms of social activeness of Polish farmers change due to the COVID-19 pandemic? The social activeness included participation in formal organisations, informal gatherings and help, and social life. As we could read in the Introduction, the most restrictive regulations were present between October 2020 and May 2021. Apart from official regulations, social life was affected by fear, the number of infections, and being accustomed to the situation. In Poland, the biggest fear of getting ill was observed between March 2020 and April 2021 (CBOS, 2022). Thus during our research, the research team found it important to distinguish the first year of pandemic from the second year, due to differing limits to gathering and social sentiments.

The research was based on phone interviews carried out in December 2022 with village administrators (CATI), and the questions concerned types of the organisations existing in the village and social activeness before the pandemic, during its first year, and during its second year, and some minor additional issues such as description of the village, organisation of help for those in quarantine, etc. There were mostly close-ended questions, many of which contained also reply “other- what?”, and few open questions. The interview was designed by the project team, and the interviews themselves were carried out by a professional company.

The initial sample consisted of 500 NUTS 5 communes (out of almost 2500 communes in Poland), proportionally to their number in NUTS 2 regions. The National Association of Village Administrators³ provided the research team with a name and phone number of one village administrator for each selected commune. There were at least 5 attempts to contact the respondents. Finally, there were 124 interviews carried out, and the proportion for each region was similar to the proportions of communes. The data was analysed with the use of Excel and SPSS computer programmes; this paper contains descriptive statistics presented mostly in the form of figures and comments.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Basic sample characteristics

The number of village inhabitants was diversified. According to the declarations of the village administrators, they consisted most often by 21 to 50 families (38%), followed by 51 to 100 families (23%), and between 101 and 300 families (19%) (Figure 2).

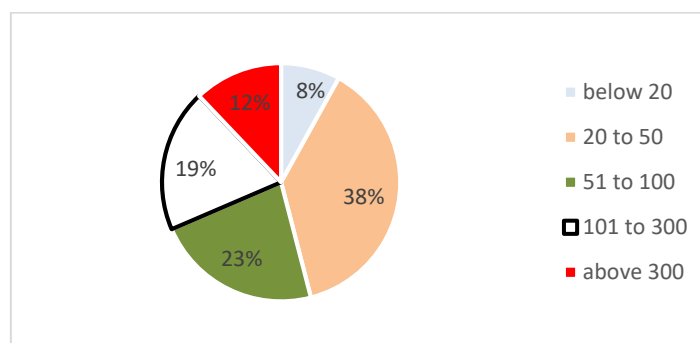


Figure 2. Estimated number of families in the analysed villages according to the administrators' declarations (including one-person families)

Comparing this information with declared number of farms we can conclude that in the sample there are mostly families with other than farming sources of income: in 59% of villages there were less than 20 farms, in 1/4 between 21 and 50 farms, and only in 17% of the villages had over 50 farms (while there were 54% villages containing over 50 families) (Figure 3.)

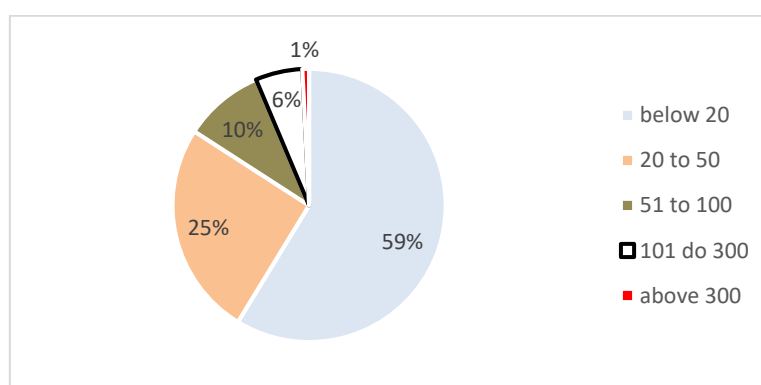


Figure 3. Number of farms in the analysed villages according to the administrators' declarations

³ On average there are 16 village administrators in each NUTS 5 commune in Poland.

Additionally, in 9% of the villages there was no farm that produced mostly for the market, and in 70% of the villages there were only between 1 and 20 such farms. Although in 7% of the villages there were above 100 farms, there was no such village in which over 100 farms would produce mostly for the market.

2. Changes in social activeness due to pandemic

Presented earlier in this paper restrictions and limits to gathering combined with social sentiments affected social behaviour, which is visible in the research results.

Figure 4. presents presence of a set of the most popular rural organisations in analysed villages: some time earlier, just before the pandemic, and in December 2022 (the time of the research – officially it was still the time of pandemic, but there were practically no restrictions). Just before the pandemic in 59% of the villages there was an active community centre, in 44% there was Rural Women’s Circle, and in 40% Volunteer Fire Brigades. Much less popular were sport clubs (23%), associations for the development of this village (16%), producer groups (15%), Local Action Groups (12%), and Farmers’ Circles (7%). Low number of Farmers’ Circles is no surprise when we consider (mentioned earlier) the number of farms producing mostly for the market.

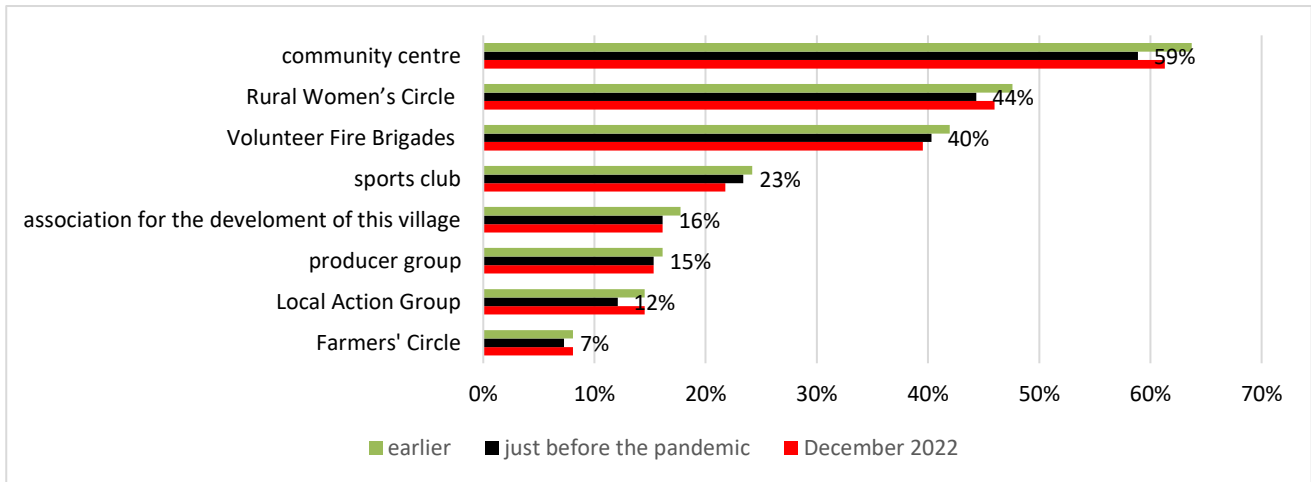


Figure 4. Organisations present in the villages before and during COVID-19 pandemic

It is also visible that the number of organisations was declining with time before the pandemic began (in each type there were less of them “just before” than “earlier”. However, between the outbreak of the pandemic and December 2022, the number of villages having active community centre, Rural Women’s Circle, Local Action Groups, and Farmers’ Circles increased.

The number of organisations in one village in the sample is presented on Figure 5. No organisations were in about 18% of the sample. In about 60% of the villages there were between 1 and 3 organisations. Few of the villages had 6 or more organisations. During the pandemic their number changed only slightly: it increased by 1 or 2 in eight villages, declined by 1 in ten villages, and in 105 villages remained the same. In 19 villages no such organisation has ever existed⁴. Thus, it is visible that the number of formal organisations did not change significantly and had no clear direction. Thus there is no clear trend visible in the data.

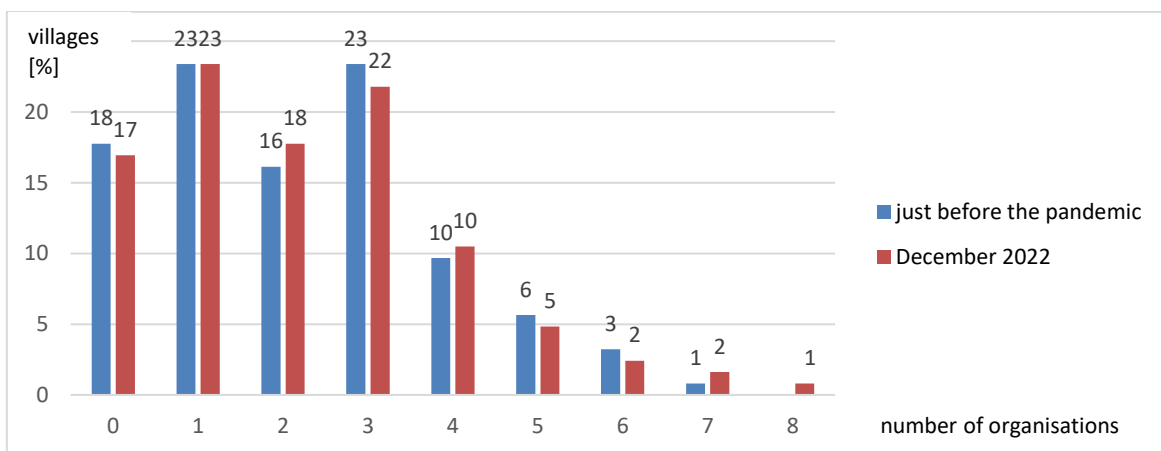


Figure 5. Number of organisations active in the villages just before the COVID-19 pandemic and in December 2022 [% of villages]

⁴ These were various villages, between 5 and over 250 families. The number of farms was between 1 and 30, and between 0 and 20 produced mostly for the market.

Research carried out in Italy between March and May 2020 revealed that after the outspread of pandemic people with higher social capital became more active, while those with lower level of social capital became less active (Menardo et al. 2023). To check this phenomenon in Polish conditions, a comparison of active and inactive organisations was carried out (Table 1.) – to ensure a proper size of the sample only the most significant organisations were taken into consideration.

Table 1. Change in the activeness of the most popular rural organisations in Poland during the 1st and 2nd year of COVID-19 pandemic (compared to their initial activeness before 2020) [%].

Organisation	Period during COVID-19 pandemic	Initially very active			Initially rather active			Initially rather not active		
		decrease [%]	no change [%]	increase [%]	decrease [%]	no change [%]	increase [%]	decrease [%]	no change [%]	increase [%]
Community centres (n=73)	1 st year	64	32	5	53	36	11	28	60	13
	2 nd year	32	55	14	28	47	25	13	80	7
Rural Women's Circle (n=55)	1 st year	76	24	0	64	36	0	50	50	0
	2 nd year	32	48	20	25	57	18	100	0	0
Volunteer Fire Brigades (n=50)	1 st year	18	83	0	36	64	0	17	83	0
	2 nd year	13	77	10	21	72	7	17	83	0

Source: own research

The first impression is that the decline of activeness in all types of organisations was higher during the first year of pandemic, than during the second one. Similarly, increase of activeness was observed in more villages in the second year than in the first one. In community centres and rural women's clubs the decrease was much more visible in those organisations that were initially active, which contradicts the observations done by Menardo et al. (2023). Perhaps this is because they nowadays play rather a role of socialising than of typical NGOs. At the same time the decrease of activeness among voluntary fire brigades was the most visible among organisations of middle activeness.

Apart from social organisations, also informal forms of cooperation were popular in Polish rural areas. In this research the respondents were asked to say which forms of cooperation could be observed in their villages before the COVID-19 pandemic. The most popular were giving a lift by car on the way to a shop, doctor, or nearest town (72%), followed by joint work for the common good of the village or commune (69%), help on a farm (49%), doing everyday shopping (45%), taking care of a child, an elderly or disabled person (42%), and jointly selling agricultural products (17%).

Figures 6 and 7 show that in some of the villages the pandemic had negative influence on informal cooperation, while in some the impact was positive.

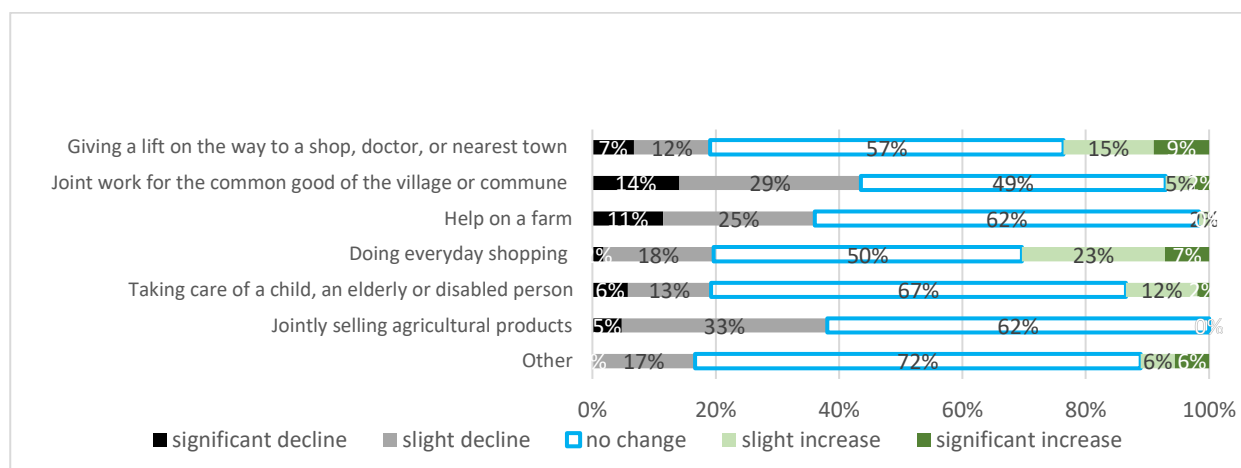


Figure 6. Polish farmers' informal cooperation in the 1st year of the COVID-19 pandemic compared to the time just before the pandemic

Depending on the type of cooperation, during the first year of COVID-19 pandemic between 49% and 67% of village administrators did not notice any change in the level of informal cooperation (the lowest number was for joint work for the common good of the village or commune, and the highest – taking care of a child, an elderly or disabled person). Jointly selling agricultural products either stayed at the same level or declined – there was no rise noticed. More villages noticed decline than rise in the case of joint work for the common good (43% compared to 7%), help on a farm (36% compared to 2%), taking care of a child etc. (19% compared to 14%).

On the other hand, more village administrators observed rise than decline in the case of doing everyday shopping (decline in 20% of the villages and rise in 30% of them), giving a lift to e shop, etc. (19% compared to 24%). This could be a result of the conditions: people who did not have their own car were afraid of getting COVID-19 in the public transport.

Looking at Graphs 6 and 7, one can notice that a large share of cooperation that declined in the first year of pandemic came back in the second one (significant rise of the number of respondents that declared it did not change). In all of the types of cooperation the number of village administrators that declared significant or slight decline was much lower in the second year than in the first year of pandemic.

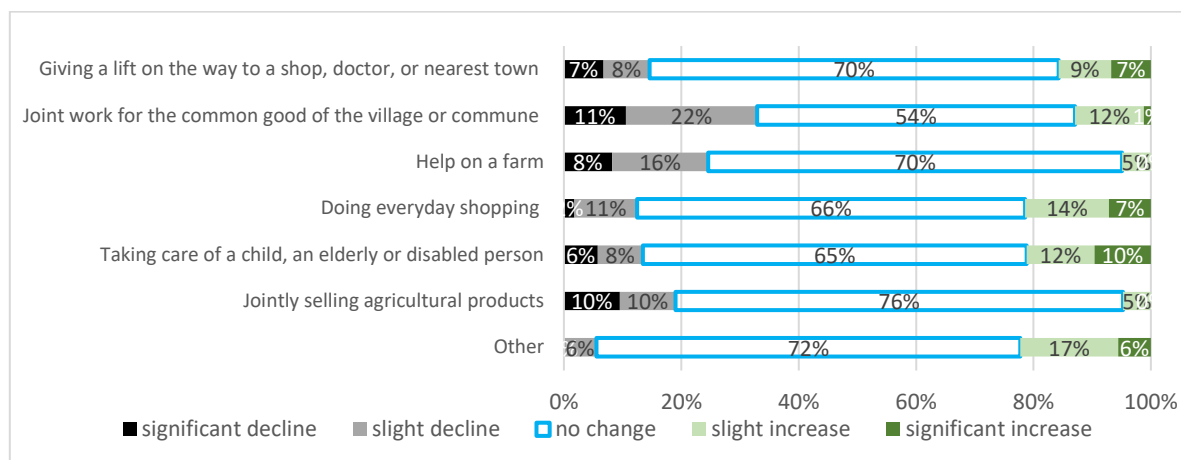


Figure 7. Polish farmers' informal cooperation in the 2nd year of the COVID-19 pandemic compared to the time just before the pandemic

Conclusions

To conclude, it is clear that the changes of both formal and informal cooperation of farmers in Poland were not uniform; at the same time in some villages there was a decline, and in some – rise of the activeness. Moreover, the intensity of changes varied according to the type of cooperation. Generally, higher share of villages observed decline than rise, and the decline was much deeper during the first year of COVID-19 pandemic than during the second year. In some of the villages a significant mobilisation was observed – especially in spheres that are unomittable, such as doing everyday shopping, taking care of children and disabled person, or giving a lift to a shop, doctor, or nearest town.

Acknowledgements. The publication is financed from the state budget under the project of the Ministry of Education and Science "Science for Society" No. NdS/532598/2021/2022. The total value of the project is PLN 290 950.00 (Poland).

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