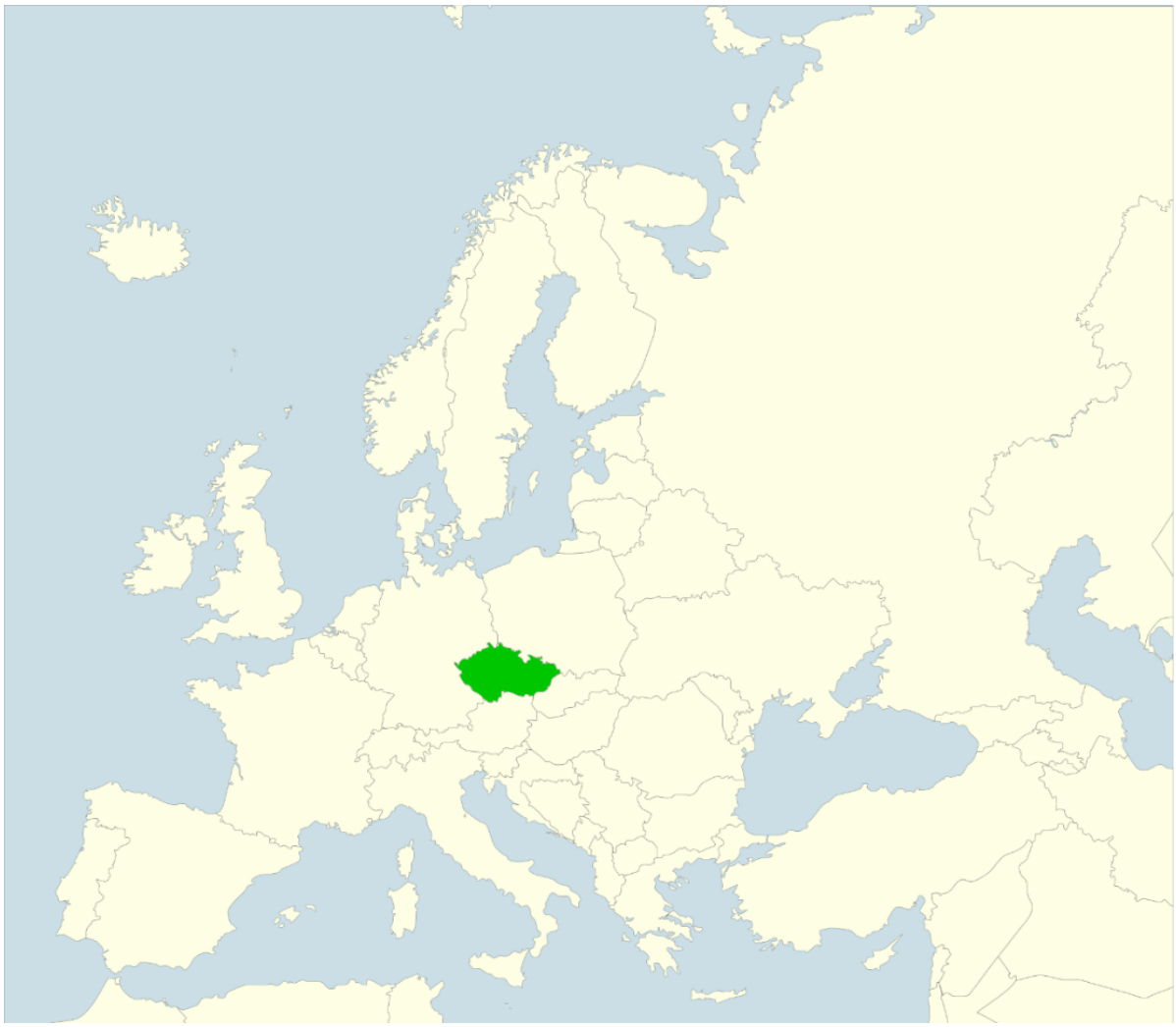
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THE FUTURE OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN RURAL AREAS OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC: EXPERT FORECAST USING THE DELPHI METHOD

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Abstract: This paper examines factors that may influence the future development of economic entities operating in rural areas of the Czech Republic. Attention is also given to peripheral rural areas, as they face the greatest challenges regarding the future of entrepreneurship. Using qualitative research through the Delphi method, the authors gathered data from experts in academia and in rural development, as well as from mayors of rural municipalities. Expert opinions focused on factors affecting business opportunities and prospects for business development in rural areas of the Czech Republic. The spread of business innovations in Czech rural areas is generally slower. However, the education and competence of the local population, as well as infrastructure networks, are important for the practical spread of these innovations. The results confirmed that the factors influencing the future of entrepreneurship in rural areas are the quality of transport infrastructure, population ageing and subsidy policy.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship, Economic Entities, Rural Areas, Transport Infrastructure, Agriculture, Subsidies

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Souhrn: Cílem tohoto příspěvku je prozkoumat faktory, které mohou ovlivnit budoucí vývoj ekonomických subjektů podnikajících ve venkovských oblastech České republiky. Pozornost je věnována také periferním venkovským oblastem, neboť právě ty čelí největším výzvám z hlediska budoucnosti podnikání. Pomocí kvalitativního výzkumu Delphi metodou byly zpracovány informace získané od expertů z akademické sféry a ekonomů, zabývajících se venkovem, a starostů venkovských obcí. Expertní názory sledovaly faktory ovlivňující možnosti podnikání a perspektivy jeho dalšího vývoje ve venkovských oblastech České republiky. Rozšiřování inovací v podnikání je na českém venkově obecně pomalejší, ale pro konkrétní praktické šíření těchto inovací jsou důležité vzdělanost a kompetentnost místní populace či existence infrastrukturních sítí. Výsledky potvrdily, že faktory ovlivňující budoucnost podnikání ve venkovských oblastech jsou kvalita dopravní infrastruktury, stárnutí obyvatelstva a dotační politika.

Klíčová slova: podnikání, ekonomické subjekty, venkov, dopravní infrastruktura, zemědělství, dotace

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Highlights:

- Agriculture contributes to rural development through greening and organic production.
- Transport infrastructure impacts on existing business opportunities in rural areas.
- The ageing population will bring problems with securing labor force.
- The future of rural businesses depends on education and technological literacy.

1. Introduction

Czech rural areas face significant demographic challenges, primarily population ageing and changing migration patterns. Although the overall population is declining in rural areas, the outflow of young people to urban centres in search of better job opportunities is particularly worrisome, further accelerating the process of demographic ageing (Ministerstvo pro místní rozvoj ČR, 2019, p. 38).

These challenges are most pronounced in peripheral rural areas, which constitute a significant part of the Czech Republic's territory. According to the Regional Development Strategy of the Czech Republic 21+, the category of economically and socially endangered territories includes 75 municipalities with extended competence, which together account for 25% of the Czech population (Ministerstvo pro místní rozvoj ČR, 2020). These are mainly inner peripheries along the borders of regions (e.g., between the Central Bohemian, Plzeň, South Bohemian, and Vysočina Regions) and outer peripheries along the state borders (the Liberec, Ústí nad Labem, Karlovy Vary, and Plzeň Regions). These areas are characterised by lower-quality technical, civic, and transport infrastructure, an above-average ageing index, a lower educational structure of the population, and higher unemployment rates (Jeřábek & Wokoun, 2024).

Studies focused specifically on rural peripheries (Labrianidis, 2004) demonstrate that peripheries are not a single, uniform category but include diverse types, for example, lagging peripheries (typical of Southern Europe) and advancing peripheries (e.g., in central and northern Italy, eastern Germany, or western Ireland). Labrianidis (2004) also highlights the heterogeneity of entrepreneurial processes in these areas, from need-driven entrepreneurship in marginalised regions to opportunity-driven entrepreneurship in more dynamic peripheral contexts.

The diversity of rural areas in Europe is also emphasised by the Territorial Agenda 2030 of the European Union (2020), which draws on ESPON studies and identifies a wide range of place types, including rural areas, inner peripheries, and peripheral areas, each with distinct development potential and challenges.

The research questions are based on theoretical knowledge and previous research conducted by the authors.

The paper opens with a definition of the research problem and objectives. The theoretical foundations section follows, divided into thematic subchapters that address factors considered relevant to the future of entrepreneurship in rural areas: technological progress, transport infrastructure, population ageing, agriculture, and subsidies. Rural tourism and food deserts are briefly mentioned as relevant topics for future research. The theoretical part is followed by a description of the Delphi research methodology and the composition of the expert panel. The analytical section presents the results and their interpretation. The paper concludes with a discussion that links the empirical findings to the theoretical framework and highlights the study's limitations.

This empirical investigation examines factors that may influence the future of economic entities doing business in rural areas.

Sub-objectives of the research

- To explore the future of economic entities in the Czech countryside regarding innovation, especially the expected expansion of automation, robotisation and digitalisation.
- To assess how the state of transport infrastructure influences business opportunities in rural areas.
- To assess how population ageing affects rural businesses.
- To examine the role of agriculture in the future development of rural areas.
- Identify to what extent subsidies influence the current situation in business in the Czech countryside.

2. Theoretical foundations of the research

The Rural Development Concept (Ministerstvo pro místní rozvoj ČR, 2019, p. 59) strives for the countryside to be considered a good place to live in 2027. This objective is to be achieved through:

- adequate infrastructure and basic amenities,
- a stable and diversified local economy,
- a high-quality and sustainable environment.

Given the focus of our research on the future of rural areas from an economic development perspective, we will primarily focus on factors that influence the development of entrepreneurial activities in rural areas. However, we must first define what we mean by the term "rural area."

Rural space has been defined and conceptualised in various ways. Cloke, Marsden and Mooney (2006) emphasise that rural areas cannot be understood merely as a physical space, but as a set of social processes, identities and representations. Woods (2011) views rural areas as the result of global processes, local identities, economic structures and cultural meanings.

In the Czech and Slovak context, rural areas are primarily studied by geographers and social scientists such as Bernard (2012), Gajdoš (2015) and Delín and Pospěch (2016). Rural areas are understood as spaces with lower population density and specific social structures and functions, while their social and cultural aspects are also emphasised. Rural areas are often analysed in the context of regional differentiation and peripherality.

Unique features characterise the Czech countryside, including a high concentration of small municipalities, various settlement and landscape types, an elaborate network of roads, and natural divides between individual settlements. Even smaller rural communities preserved their cultural identity (Binek et al., 2007). Such a fragmented settlement structure is unique in Europe. Only Slovakia and France have similar characteristics (Kunc et al., 2021).

Durkheim (cited in Pospěch et al., 2014, pp. 13, 34) states that with the gradual development of the division of labour between the city and the countryside, the very concept of the countryside changed. Various definitions of the countryside were gradually applied, as found in Maříková et al. (1996). These differentiating elements, except demographic ones, are losing their importance. Experts generally consider indicators of geographical location or the area's economic performance far more significant.

The typology of rural areas varies across disciplines (geography, sociology, regional development, and statistics). In the Central European context, the OECD (1994) typology is widely used to distinguish regions by the share of the population living in rural municipalities: predominantly rural, intermediate, and predominantly urban.

The European Commission/Eurostat uses a classification of cities, towns, suburbs, and rural areas. This is currently the most widely used statistical typology in the EU. For the classification of rural areas, the ESPON programme's studies are important, as they provide more sophisticated typologies than those of the OECD or Eurostat alone. The most frequently cited is the EDORA project (European Development Opportunities for Rural Areas), which assumes that the European countryside is not homogeneous and that several dimensions must be assessed simultaneously. Rural regions have different economic structures, varying access to cities, differing social situations, and varying development potential. Therefore, a uniform development policy cannot be applied to all rural areas. EDORA identified three main ways of explaining the transformations of rural areas: the agri-centric narrative understands the countryside primarily in connection with agriculture; the narrative of global competitiveness assumes rural development based on a region's ability to integrate into the wider economy; and the urban-rural relations narrative sees the key role in connections to cities, mobility and accessibility of services. EDORA concluded that the differences between rural regions are not caused solely by location or natural conditions, but primarily by so-called territorial capital, human capital, social capital, the quality of institutions, entrepreneurial culture and the capacity for cooperation and innovation. It therefore recommends a place-based, neo-endogenous approach to rural development, combining local initiative with support from higher levels of governance. The experts we approached may have different views of the countryside according to their professional expertise. In their responses, they very often pay greater attention to peripheral rural regions.

These regions have a lower socioeconomic level, poorer technical and social infrastructure, an ageing population, and weak economic development (Musil & Müller, 2008, pp. 344–346). This study examines rural areas in the Czech Republic. Particular attention is given to peripheral rural areas, as they face the greatest challenges for the future of entrepreneurship.

Definitions of entrepreneurship are most often based on legislation, documents from international organisations, state institutions, and academic publications. Entrepreneurship can be understood from different perspectives, with each institution emphasising different aspects. According to Veber and Srpová (2008), some definitions focus on the economic aspect of

entrepreneurship, others on its psychological or sociological nature. In general, entrepreneurship is defined by the Chamber of Commerce of the Czech Republic (Hospodářská komora České republiky, 2023) as an activity defined by law aimed at achieving profit. Entrepreneurship is not only one of the most basic phenomena of modern economic life, which aims to obtain added value but also a motivation to achieve something, create prosperity or contribute to creating new jobs (Veber & Srpová, 2008).

Entrepreneurship is a key prerequisite for the economic, social and demographic stability of rural areas (Steinerowska-Streb et al., 2024). Korsgaard et al. (2015) distinguish between two types: rural entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship in rural areas. Entrepreneurship in rural areas refers to any entrepreneurial activity carried out in rural spaces. Here, the countryside serves merely as a geographic location, and the business need not be connected to the local community or regional resources. Rural entrepreneurship, by contrast, is closely tied to the character of the given countryside. The entrepreneur draws on local natural, cultural and social resources, builds on regional traditions and creates value rooted in the uniqueness of the place.

In terms of sustainability, rural entrepreneurship is generally considered more advantageous, as it is more closely connected to the local environment, community and long-term development. It often creates jobs for residents and helps preserve cultural heritage and identity. However, entrepreneurship in rural areas can also generate economic value and create jobs, and therefore, this study addresses both types of entrepreneurship.

Rural businesses face specific challenges, such as limited transport access and fewer services, which complicate business operations. Many services cannot operate here due to low demand (Ministerstvo zemědělství České republiky, 2007). Settlements with fewer than 200 inhabitants face the most significant problems, including insufficient infrastructure, weak business activity and difficult transport accessibility (Ježek & Mičudová, 2020). Research at the subregional level has demonstrated a statistical dependence between transport accessibility and the level of territorial development, which affects rural entrepreneurship (Čermák, 2005). Poorer accessibility complicates access to markets, suppliers and employees, while the lack of local shopping options causes an outflow of funds to cities (Hruška, 2017).

2.1 The influence of technological progress and its impact on the countryside

The future of economic entities operating in rural areas is influenced by several factors, among which technological development (automation, robotisation and digitalisation) can play a significant role. These processes can improve local residents' quality of life by making services more efficient for the population and creating new jobs, thereby helping rural development. It is, therefore, essential to focus on increasing technological literacy and supporting investment in human capital (Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2012).

However, research in the Czech Republic shows that not everyone considers this direction a priority. According to Pavlík et al. (2021), representatives of rural self-governments do not consider the use of SMART solutions a current development priority, but rather a medium-term

goal. Ženka et al. (2017) examined the polarity between the Czech Republic's metropolitan and rural or peripheral regions. Rural firms occupy lower positions in global production networks, as the emphasis is on the price of production factors rather than innovation potential. Rural regions significantly lag behind metropolitan areas in economic performance due to insufficient market size and the structure of economic activities (Ženka et al., 2015).

Information technologies can significantly improve life in rural areas by contributing to the creation of new job opportunities and ensuring the provision of public services. An obstacle may be the underdeveloped infrastructure of broadband and information technologies, the development of which will not take place without the support of the public and private sectors (Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2012). Small businesses face financing and internet connectivity challenges, making it difficult to implement digital technologies. On the contrary, larger firms (agricultural enterprises) have easier access to these technologies, thanks to higher efficiency and more substantial support from technology suppliers, which allows them to use information technologies to their full extent (Bolfe et al., 2020).

Agriculture has historically been the dominant economic activity in rural areas and continues to significantly shape their character. However, contemporary rural development is based on a diversified economic structure. Agriculture is no longer the only, or even the most important, activity, but rather one of several interconnected components of the rural economy. Based on an empirical study of 3,000 farms, McElwee and Bosworth (2010) show that agricultural enterprises increasingly diversify their activities beyond commodity production, and that successful diversification requires specific entrepreneurial and strategic skills on the part of farmers. Typical forms of diversification include agritourism, processing regional products, providing services, or producing renewable energy. The diversification of income contributes to the resilience of rural businesses and to the overall development of rural regions.

The business environment of agricultural enterprises and farmers is discussed in detail in Pělucha et al. (2023). It examines how digitalisation and information and communication technologies affect agricultural companies. The study focused on the Železné hory Mts. region, representing a typical inner rural periphery with a significant agricultural base. The results show that the digitalisation process is still on the fringes of interest in this rural area, and the use of digital technologies is still low. Ježek (2020) states that the population's current level of digital skills slows down the development of digital technologies in agriculture. Their wider implementation could significantly contribute to sustainable and efficient management of agricultural processes. The lower initiative of local actors currently limits the possibilities of use.

2.2 The impact of transport infrastructure and accessibility on business in rural areas

The state of transport infrastructure limits the economic development of rural municipalities. Although the road network is relatively dense, lower-class roads predominate and peripheral parts of the regions have insufficient connections. These factors reduce transport serviceability and labour mobility (Jeřábek et al., 2021).

Research (Halás, 2014; Marada, 2001) confirms that poorer transport accessibility is the main problem of peripheral areas. Jeřábek and Wokoun (2024) add that regions on the borders of counties often face all three main problems: poor transport accessibility, depopulation, and lack of jobs. Typical examples are the areas between the Pardubický and Olomoucký regions (Svitavy and Zábřeh micro-regions) and between the Olomoucký and Moravskoslezský regions (Jeseník micro-region). A solution to this situation could be introducing a flexible demand-based public transport system that would better respond to the individual needs of residents. However, to successfully implement such a system, it is necessary to ensure high-quality internet coverage in rural areas and adequate technical equipment for residents (Hlaváček et al., 2023).

Research by Pavlík et al. (2021, pp. 203–209), based on interviews with local governments and action groups in the ORP Krnov and Vsetín areas, showed that large companies concentrate in only a few rural municipalities with good accessibility to economic centres, while business activity decreases with distance from these centres. Transport services are assessed as sufficient and gradually improving, but the connection with the regional capital remains problematic, especially in small and remote municipalities.

In contrast, larger municipalities and suburban areas face challenges related to climate adaptation, which includes the need to adapt infrastructure and development plans to changes in climate conditions (Ježek & Mičudová, 2020). In peripheral rural areas, businesses focused on construction, trade, and research are developing more, while traditional sectors, such as agriculture and wood processing, are gradually declining (Vorobljevová & Novotná, 2023).

2.3 Population ageing and its impacts on business

As populations age worldwide, concerns about the economic impacts of demographic change are growing (Kábrt, 2024). A key response is to adapt the work environment to different age groups and to create suitable conditions for older employees (Ilmarinen, 2006).

The Czech Republic, like many other developed countries, is facing demographic change. The share of seniors aged 65 and over is estimated at approximately 20% of the population by the end of 2024 and could increase to 29% by mid-century (Český statistický úřad, 2024a). Foreign migration also plays a role in the demographic balance, mainly through the influx of young people aged 20–34, with a gradual increase in the share of women among immigrants expected in connection with the growing demand for labour in social, health and care services (Český statistický úřad, 2024b). These trends are also reflected in rural areas, where the ageing population increases the need to expand basic health and social services (Svobodová & Věžník, 2014, p. 28), which are gradually deteriorating in small municipalities (Bernard et al., 2020, p. 5). The Territorial Agenda 2030 of the European Union (2020) similarly emphasises that ageing and migration lead to a further concentration of population in urban areas and to the depopulation of rural and peripheral areas, especially in remote areas with limited access to public services and economic and social opportunities.

Perceptions of problems vary depending on the degree of peripherality. In peripheral regions, there is a significant outflow of the working-age population, including a brain drain. Young people often leave rural areas for cities in search of better job opportunities, leading to a declining workforce and an increasing proportion of seniors in rural areas. At the same time, it is difficult to maintain adequate service levels due to low demand and a declining population. With the increasing proportion of older consumers, the so-called silver economy is emerging, with products and services tailored to older people who increasingly demand healthcare, leisure, and cultural activities (Niemczyk et al., 2023). The ageing population also affects the labour market, with growing interest in employing older workers as younger generations decline and working lives are extended. Modern management approaches respond to this trend, especially age management, which focuses on all age groups with an emphasis on people over 50 and on the effective use of human resources (Kocianová, 2019).

2.4 Czech agriculture's challenges

Demographic changes, including an ageing population and the outflow of younger workers, harm the competitiveness of sectors such as agriculture. As emerged from an expert interview in Vorobljevová's (2023, Appendix F) research with Josef Polák, Director of the Agriculture and Regional Development Audit Department of the Supreme Audit Office, ageing and an inappropriate age structure are significant causes of low competitiveness in agricultural and forestry production. Compared to other sectors, agriculture shows an ageing workforce. The main barrier to generational renewal is the low attractiveness of work in agriculture, namely, low salaries, physical demands, seasonality and instability of long-term work.

Young people may be more inclined to live in the countryside if economic and environmental projects are implemented and supported there. To support generational renewal in agriculture, where more than half of farms are managed by farmers over 55, the Czech National Rural Network organised educational activities and created a knowledge platform (Ježek, 2020, pp. 35, 44).

Statistical data show that during 2000–2020, the number of agricultural entities decreased by a quarter (from almost 29,000 in the area-wide census), while natural persons decreased by almost a third and legal entities increased by half. The most significant decrease was in livestock production, where the number of entities fell by more than 42% (Český statistický úřad, 2021). Due to the decreasing number of Czech workers, the number of foreign workers from Ukraine, Slovakia and Romania increased significantly, from 7,000 in 2014 to 23,000 in 2022 (Ministerstvo zemědělství České republiky, 2023). Foreign experience, especially studies from rural England, demonstrates the positive impact of immigrants on rural development, replacing the outgoing younger generation, developing businesses and creating jobs (Kalantaridis & Bika, 2006).

The government is responding to these challenges by simplifying conditions for organic farming and reducing the administrative burden for farmers (Ministerstvo zemědělství České republiky, 2024). The Czech Republic is increasingly emerging as a leader in organic farming, with

the second-largest average farm size in the EU (114 ha) after Slovakia, larger than that of conventional farms (82 ha) (Ministerstvo zemědělství České republiky, 2022, p. 26). This trend is complemented by the 'Find Your Farmer' initiative, which supports direct sales of agricultural products and expands opportunities for regional producers (Najdi zemědělce, n.d.; Moudrý et al., 2019).

2.5 Subsidy policy in rural areas – benefits and pitfalls

The issue of subsidies is a controversial topic in contemporary rural entrepreneurship. While subsidies significantly distort the market environment and their administration often limits entrepreneurs' flexibility, they also serve as an important tool for municipalities to support selected areas of development and influence the local entrepreneurial environment.

In the 2014–2020 programming period, there were over 200 subsidy titles for municipalities, with the Ministry of Regional Development (27 titles) and the Ministry of the Environment (22 titles) providing the most. However, municipalities could apply for only two-thirds of them (MEPCO, 2019, pp. 7, 156). According to the President of the Supreme Audit Office (SAO), the current subsidy system is unmanageable, distorts the market economy and requires fundamental revision (Nejvyšší kontrolní úřad, 2023, p. 5). However, EU and national subsidy programmes help economically weak regions remove obstacles to entrepreneurship and innovation (ESPON, 2020). Agricultural subsidies enable various businesses to operate in the Czech countryside, from large enterprises to individual farmers, forestry, water management and small and medium-sized agricultural enterprises (Binek et al., 2009, p. 42).

As emerged from the expert interview with Josef Polák (Vorobljevová, 2023, Appendix F), without support, these enterprises would achieve worse economic results, and Czech agriculture has become highly dependent on standard agricultural policy measures. The Ministry of Agriculture favours large food companies by providing more subsidy options and simpler conditions than for small and medium-sized enterprises (Nejvyšší kontrolní úřad, 2022, Audit No. 21/33).

3. Research investigation using the Delphi method

For the Delphi research, the authors defined selected aspects of business development in the Czech countryside. The questions were created based on the analysis in the theoretical part. They were directed towards the perspectives of business development and the circumstances that influence business opportunities in these areas.

The following questions were formulated as part of the survey:

- Given the expected expansion of automation, robotisation, digitalisation and deepening globalisation in the coming years, what is the future of economic entities operating in rural areas?
- How does the current state of rural transport infrastructure and the transport accessibility of rural municipalities affect existing rural business opportunities?

- How is the change in the population's age structure and its ageing reflected and will be reflected in rural businesses?
- What significant role will agribusiness play in rural development in the coming years compared to the current situation?
- How do subsidies affect the current situation of rural businesses?

3.1 Description of the method

A qualitative method was used for the research investigation, which was implemented through a Delphi method. This method is characterised by collecting expert opinions with multiple rounds of questioning (Linstone & Turoff, 1975). The method is intended to obtain expert opinions on issues that are more difficult to grasp statistically or to predict future developments in a particular area. The Delphi method takes place in predetermined, sequential steps. At the very beginning, a group of experts must be appropriately selected to participate in this method in such a way as to ensure higher reliability of the research. Experts are informed about the actual course of the research investigation and assured of anonymity (Eger & Egerová, 2022).

For this method, we prepared a set of questions related to factors influencing the future development of economic entities operating in rural areas. In the first round, experts were approached with a cover letter and asked to answer the questions. In the second round, they were presented with the anonymised answers from the first round. They evaluated them on a Likert scale (Gavora, 2000), where 5 indicates 'agreement', 1 'disagreement' and 3 'neither agreement nor disagreement'. In the third round, the evaluated responses from all experts were returned, and the experts ranked them by importance to obtain the final responses (Eger & Egerová, 2022). The Kendall coefficient of agreement (Figure 1) is used to analyse the third-round Delphi method data.

$$W = \frac{\Sigma X^2 . \frac{(\Sigma X)^2}{n}}{\frac{1}{12} k^2 . (n^3 - n)}$$

where:

X sum of the order of answers
k number of responses examined
n number of expert opinions

Figure 1. The Kendall coefficient of agreement. Source: Chráska, 2016, p. 55

The coefficient ranges from 0 to +1, where +1 indicates complete agreement among the group of experts in the ranking. A W value greater than 0.3 indicates strong agreement, while a value equal to or less than 0.3 indicates weak agreement (Habibi et al., 2014).

According to Egerová and Mužík (2010), the number of rounds is not fixed, but three completed rounds are considered sufficient for the Delphi method. In their second round, the authors used the average for calculation, and the same approach was adopted in this research.

3.2 Research implementation

The Delphi panel evaluated factors that may affect business in rural areas: the expected expansion of automation, robotisation and digitalisation; the current transport infrastructure and transport accessibility of rural municipalities; changes in the population's age structure; the future role of agriculture; and the impact of subsidies on rural businesses. After the preparatory phase and pilot testing of the questions, the survey was conducted from 1 March to 30 April 2023.

Academics and economists were involved in the research via the website vyplnto.cz. The mayors participated based at their own request during a personal meeting

3.3 The expert panel

The Delphi method requires a heterogeneous panel of experts. Our panel comprised professionals from various fields dealing with rural areas, who provide more valid answers based on their specialisation and awareness of the issue.

The experts were chosen based on the following criteria:

- an academic researcher long engaged in regional rural development, policies influencing rural development, rural business sectors, marketing or the impact of globalisation on rural areas;
- an economist working with finance and rural economics;
- a mayor of a rural municipality, since the municipal administration influences the economic and social development of its territory.

A total of 33 experts were approached, evenly distributed across the three fields. Fifteen experts agreed to cooperate and responded in the first round: 9 from academia (University of West Bohemia in Pilsen, University of Economics in Prague, Czech University of Life Sciences in Prague, Jan Evangelista Purkyně University in Ústí nad Labem, Jihlava Polytechnic University, University of Ostrava, Charles University), 4 economists and 2 mayors of rural municipalities.

We acknowledge that the lower participation of respondents from the public administration group represents a limitation of this study.

4. The research analysis

In the first round, 15 experts answered five open-ended questions. The statements were anonymised, and very similar ones were combined. In the second round, 13 experts rated the statements from the first round on a specified Likert scale, with the average rating calculated for each statement. Statements with an average below 3 were treated as disagreement and

excluded from the third round; those with an average above 3 indicated agreement. In the third round, the experts ranked the remaining statements from most to least important, and rank sums were calculated for each statement. The tables below show the experts' statements on the open questions and the results of the second and third rounds.

The first question addressed automation, robotisation, digitalisation and globalisation. The experts assessed the following statements:

S1: The future of economic entities in rural areas will depend on the extent to which educated people who can master these technologies reach the countryside.

S2: The spread of innovations from the above-described business trends is generally slower in the Czech countryside; for the specific practical spread of these innovations, the education and competence of the local population or the existence of infrastructure networks are important.

S3: Agriculture will always be important in rural areas and will not decrease due to these trends.

S4: Globalisation opens up the possibility for rural entrepreneurs to strengthen the use and valorisation of local resources.

S5: The trends will mean an increase in new business and job opportunities in the Czech countryside. However, they will also lead to the disappearance of jobs in traditional sectors of the rural economy.

S6: Medium and large companies will not have problems with these trends, but the existence of small companies will depend on a network of local customers.

S7: Due to the above trends, the importance of agriculture for the economy of this area will continue to decrease.

S8: Except for craft production, industrial production in the Czech countryside will decline.

S9: These trends will lead to the expansion of production in rural areas, while the labour shortage will decrease with the development of robotisation.

S10: Due to these trends in rural areas, a gradual strengthening of the residential function and a weakening of the economic function are expected.

The statements are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Evaluation of question – Please assess how you see the future of economic entities doing business in rural areas concerning the expected expansion of automation, robotisation and digitalisation and deepening globalisation in the coming years. Source: own elaboration

1st round	**2nd round**						**3rd round**
Expert answers	**Number of votes from experts**					**Average**	**Final order**
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**		
S1	0	0	1	5	7	**4,46**	**1**
S2	0	1	0	5	7	**4,38**	**3**
S3	0	3	2	6	2	3,54	2
S4	0	1	6	5	1	3,46	4
S5	1	2	1	9	0	3,38	5
S6	0	2	5	5	1	3,38	6
S7	3	2	2	6	0	**2,85**	-
S8	0	8	1	3	1	**2,77**	-
S9	1	6	3	2	1	**2,69**	-
S10	2	6	4	0	1	**2,38**	-

Likert scale: 1 = Completely disagree, 2 = Rather disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Rather agree, 5 = Completely agree.

Ten statements were identified based on the expert assessment of the importance of technological progress. The highest level of agreement was reached with the statement that the future of economic entities in rural areas will largely depend on the education of people who can master these technologies (7 experts completely agreed, 5 somewhat agreed). The same number of experts agreed that the spread of innovations in business is slower in the Czech countryside, and that the education and competence of the local population and infrastructure

networks are important for disseminating innovations. Experts also expect that future trends will lead to new business and job opportunities, but also to job losses in traditional sectors of the rural economy. Most experts did not support the claim that these trends should lead to a strengthening of the residential function and a weakening of the economic function of rural areas.

The second question addressed transport infrastructure and accessibility. The experts assessed the following statements:

S1: The current state of transport infrastructure is primarily reflected in the existing business opportunities in rural areas. Rural settlements with good transport accessibility are growing more significantly than remote settlements. Better transport accessibility will attract new business entities.

S2: The state of transport infrastructure is reflected in rural businesses by differentiating businesses according to transport location, but only in sectors dependent on transporting products and materials.

S3: Transport services and infrastructure are currently not in good condition in the Czech countryside. Any improvements would enable greater mobility of labour and capital, as without them, the willingness to travel to such places decreases significantly, and companies have difficulty operating.

S4: Improving transport infrastructure could strengthen trade and services in smaller towns due to increased mobility and individual car transport, as they would be accessible and used by customers from adjacent municipalities in the hinterland.

S5: Transport infrastructure and accessibility in the Czech countryside do not play a significant role for business nor represent a major obstacle to its development.

The statements are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Evaluation of question – Please evaluate how the current state of rural transport infrastructure and transport accessibility of rural municipalities are reflected in existing business opportunities in rural areas. Source: own elaboration

1st round	**2nd round**						**3rd round**
Expert answers	**Number of votes from experts**					**Average**	**Final order**
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**Completely agree**	
S1	0	1	0	5	7	**4,38**	**1**
S2	0	3	1	5	4	**3,77**	**2**
S3	0	0	5	7	1	**3,69**	**3**
S4	0	4	3	4	2	**3,31**	**4**
S5	4	6	0	3	0	**2,15**[3]	**-**

Likert scale: 1 = Completely disagree, 2 = Rather disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Rather agree, 5 = Completely agree.

Most experts agree that the current transport infrastructure significantly affects the business environment in rural areas. Another prevailing opinion among experts is that the state of transport infrastructure affects rural entrepreneurship through differentiation according to transport location, especially in sectors that are, by their nature, dependent on the transport of products or materials.

The third question addressed population ageing. The experts assessed the following statements:

S1: The ageing of the population will result in increasing difficulties for businesses in securing a workforce for economic activities that require physical strength.

S2: Businesses in rural areas will be significantly more exposed to the consequences of ageing due to differences in ageing.

[3] Although the average for the last statement is below 3, the statement is phrased in the negative. The low average, therefore, represents agreement that transport infrastructure and accessibility do play a significant role for business in rural areas: 10 out of 13 experts rejected the claim that transport infrastructure plays no significant role and represents no major obstacle to business development.

S3: If rural areas are equipped with appropriate transport and technical and civic infrastructure, these negative phenomena may not necessarily occur.

S4: The production role of rural areas will weaken due to demographic ageing.

The statements are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Evaluation of question – Please assess how the population's age structure and ageing change are reflected and will be reflected in future in rural business. Source: own elaboration

1st round	**2nd round**						**3rd round**
Expert answers	**Number of votes from experts**					**Average**	**Final order**
	1	2	3	4	5	**Completely agree**	
S1	0	1	2	8	2	**3,85**	**1**
S2	0	1	4	6	2	**3,69**	**2**
S3	0	3	6	2	2	**3,23**	**3**
S4	0	6	2	5	0	**2,92**	**-**

Likert scale: 1 = Completely disagree, 2 = Rather disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Rather agree, 5 = Completely agree.

Experts believe that the ageing population will pose a growing problem for businesses seeking to secure a workforce for physically demanding activities. Due to demographic differences, most are convinced that this phenomenon will affect rural areas more than urban ones. On the other hand, there is no consensus on how population ageing will affect the production function of the Czech countryside, suggesting the need for further research in this area.

The fourth question addressed agriculture and rural development. The experts assessed the following statements:

S1: Agriculture will contribute to rural development through continued greening, the development of organic production, regional production, and the growing importance of direct sales.

S2: Thanks to the impact of climate change, new development opportunities are opening up for agriculture, given the possibilities of growing new crops and the deterioration of the agricultural situation in other parts of the EU, which will be more affected by the impacts of climate change.

S3: Agriculture will play a more significant role in developing the Czech countryside because community energy in the countryside will develop.

S4: Agriculture will retain its current importance in the development of the Czech countryside.

S5: Thanks to the introduction of automation and digitalisation, agriculture is becoming a key factor for developing the Czech countryside.

S6: Agriculture will play an increasingly small role in the development of Czech rural areas due to subsidy policy settings and the impacts of climate change.

The statements are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Evaluation of question – How significant will the role of agricultural entrepreneurship play in rural development in the coming years, compared to the current situation? Source: own elaboration

1st round	**2nd round**						**3rd round**
Expert answers	**Number of votes from experts**					**Average**	**Final order**
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**Completely agree**	
S1	0	1	2	7	3	**3,92**	**1**
S2	0	2	4	5	2	**3,54**	**2**
S3	0	3	2	6	2	**3,54**	**4**
S4	1	3	3	6	0	**3,08**	**3**
S5	2	4	2	3	2	**2,92**	**-**
S6	2	5	2	3	1	**2,69**	**-**

Likert scale: 1 = Completely disagree, 2 = Rather disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Rather agree, 5 = Completely agree.

According to experts, agriculture will contribute to rural development through continued greening, organic production development, regional production support, and the growing importance of direct sales. Experts believe that climate change brings new opportunities to Czech agriculture, mainly thanks to the possibility of growing new crops. Agriculture will play a more

significant role in developing the Czech countryside because of the continuing development of community energy.

The fifth question addressed subsidies. The experts assessed the following statements:

S1: Subsidies generally allow the Czech countryside to maintain the provision of goods and services that would otherwise not be profitable for private entities.

S2: The development of independent business activities in the Czech countryside relies on various subsidies intended to support specific business sectors and civic amenities.

S3: Job creation in subsidised public services is crucial for maintaining rural businesses.

S4: Subsidies bring actors into business who would not otherwise have started a business without subsidies. Thus, they create competition for other business entities.

S5: Subsidies allow "zombie businesses" to survive.

S6: Agricultural subsidies stabilise Czech agriculture and help maintain its competitiveness and diversification of agricultural activity.

S7: Subsidies cause an increase in market prices for the purchase of the goods and services for which they are intended, and thus ultimately burden entrepreneurs as a whole

The statements are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Evaluation of question – Please assess how subsidies affect the current situation of rural businesses? Source: own elaboration

1st round	2nd round						3rd round
Expert answers	Number of votes from experts					Average	Final order
	1	2	3	4	5		
S1	0	1	3	4	5	**4,00**	**1**
S2	0	1	3	8	1	**3,69**	**2**
S3	0	2	4	6	1	**3,46**	**3**
S4	0	5	3	3	2	**3,15**	**4**
S5	0	5	4	3	1	**3,00**	**5**
S6	1	2	7	3	0	**2,92**	**-**
S7	1	6	4	1	1	**2,62**	

The vast majority of experts strongly believe that subsidies generally enable the provision of goods and services that would otherwise not be profitable for private entities. The development of entrepreneurial activity in the Czech countryside relies on various subsidies, which could not be further categorised in the questionnaire, and experts therefore comment on subsidies as a whole. The majority of experts disagree with the claim that subsidies raise market prices for the goods and services they are intended to support. The claim that agricultural subsidies stabilise Czech agriculture and help maintain its competitiveness, and the existing diversification of activities, has not elicited explicit agreement or disagreement among experts.

4.1 Order of claims from the 3rd round of research

The third round of research changed the order of statements in two areas: the future of economic entities operating in rural areas and the role of agriculture in rural development (Tables 1 and 4 in Section 4).

Regarding the future of economic entities, the order changed with the expected expansion of automation, robotisation, digitalisation, and deepening globalisation: the claim about the slower

spread of innovations fell from second to third. In contrast, the claim about the permanently important role of agriculture moved from third to second. In assessing the future role of agriculture in rural development, the claim that agriculture's current importance should be maintained moved from fourth to third place. In contrast, the claim about the growing role of agriculture in connection with community energy fell from third to fourth place.

4.2 Kendall's coefficient of concordance

Expert agreement was measured using Kendall's coefficient of concordance. The results are shown in Table 6. The most excellent agreement was expressed regarding the future of economic entities in rural areas regarding automation, robotisation, and digitalisation. It concerns especially these statements:

- The future of rural businesses depends on the availability of educated people capable of mastering new technologies.
- In the future, agriculture will remain important in rural areas.
- The spread of innovation is slower; education and infrastructure are key.
- Trends will bring new opportunities, but traditional jobs will disappear.

According to experts, these statements play a significant role in the view of the future of rural business, having already received overwhelming approval from experts in the second round of the survey. The Kendall coefficient of concordance value confirmed the strong agreement, which reached the highest level in the research (W = 0.58). A more detailed description of the coefficient calculation is given in section 3.1. On the contrary, the lowest level of agreement was recorded regarding the impact of changes in the population age structure on rural entrepreneurship.

Table 6. Kendall coefficient of concordance. Source: own elaboration

Area	Coefficient
The future of economic entities doing business in rural areas with regard to automation, robotisation and digitalisation	0,58
How is the current transport infrastructure and transport services reflected in existing business opportunities in rural areas?	0,42
How is the change in the age structure of the population reflected and will be reflected in rural business?	0,05
The role of agriculture in rural development in the coming years	0,31
The impact of subsidies on the current situation of rural business	0,53

5. Discussion and conclusion

5.1 Discussion

This study aimed to link theoretical knowledge with expert opinions obtained through the Delphi method to provide insight into the factors influencing the future of entrepreneurship in the Czech countryside. The Delphi questions concerned the countryside as a whole. In contrast, the theoretical part pays particular attention to peripheral rural areas, which face the most significant challenges for the future of entrepreneurship.

The research builds on the conception of rural areas as a multidimensional space shaped by economic, social and cultural processes (Cloke, Marsden and Mooney, 2006; Woods, 2011), and on the distinction between rural entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship in rural areas introduced by Korsgaard et al. (2015). Both forms were considered relevant for the development of rural areas (Steinerowska-Streb et al., 2024). The expert panel was deliberately composed of academics with a long-term focus on rural development, economists specialising in rural economics and mayors of rural municipalities. Although the number of mayors was limited (two), the academic part of the panel consisted of leading specialists in rural studies, whose long-standing experience at least partly compensates for the lower representation of the public administration group. A further limitation of the study is the open-ended nature of the responses, which leads to some statements partially overlapping, yet also allows for a broad range of perspectives that may stimulate further research.

The results confirm that education and technological literacy are essential prerequisites for the further development of entrepreneurship in the Czech countryside. The experts consider the local population's ability to master new technologies the most important factor shaping the future of rural economic entities. This finding is consistent with Martinez-Fernandez et al. (2012), who emphasise the importance of technological literacy and investment in human capital for the use of innovations in rural areas. The quality of technical infrastructure plays a similarly important role; insufficient broadband internet availability may slow down rural development (Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2012). Our research shows that small rural businesses have only limited access to digital technologies, while larger firms, including agricultural enterprises, adopt them more easily. This corresponds with Bolfe et al. (2020), who report that small businesses in rural areas face significant barriers related to financing and internet connectivity. Ženka et al. (2015) note that rural areas lag behind metropolitan areas in economic performance due to a smaller market size and a distinct economic structure, and the experts in our research also expect that the diffusion of innovations from the Industry 4.0 environment will be slower in rural areas. The case study by Pělucha et al. (2023) of the Železné hory Mts. region, representing a typical inner rural periphery, similarly shows that the use of digital technologies in this area remains low.

The state of transport infrastructure has been identified as one of the most significant factors influencing rural entrepreneurship. The experts agree that transport quality differentiates rural areas from a business perspective: where the network is denser and better connected to regional

centres, entrepreneurial activity develops more dynamically, whereas in more remote and less accessible settlements, the willingness of entrepreneurs to invest decreases. This corresponds with the findings of Jeřábek et al. (2021), who point out the economic lag caused by the limited connectivity of regional peripheries, and with Halás (2014) and Marada (2001), who identify poorer transport accessibility as a key barrier of peripheral regions. Jeřábek and Wokoun (2024) further emphasise that peripheries on the borders of administrative regions face a combination of poor accessibility, depopulation and a lack of jobs. The experts also agreed that adequate transport, technical and civic infrastructure may, to some extent, alleviate the disadvantages of peripheral areas and support their further development.

Experts perceive population ageing as one of the most significant challenges for rural entrepreneurship. It is primarily seen as a barrier to securing a workforce for physically demanding activities. At the same time, rural areas are expected to be affected by demographic changes more severely than urban areas. These conclusions are complemented by demographic forecasts confirming a steady growth in the share of seniors (Český statistický úřad, 2024a). Although companies can respond by adapting working conditions and implementing age management (Ilmarinen, 2006; Kocianová, 2019), the low number of young workers and the limited service capacity in peripheral regions remain serious challenges. The growing proportion of older consumers also creates new market opportunities within the so-called silver economy (Niemczyk et al., 2023). The specific impact of ageing on the production function of the Czech countryside, however, did not reach a clear consensus among the experts and remains an open question for further research.

Demographic development, particularly the ageing of the population and the outflow of younger workers, has been identified as a key factor weakening the competitiveness of rural agriculture. As stated in the expert interview with Josef Polák, Director of the Agriculture and Regional Development Audit Department of the Supreme Audit Office (Vorobljevová, 2023, Appendix F), agriculture shows a worsening age structure compared with other sectors, and the low attractiveness of agricultural work is associated with low salaries, physical demands and seasonality. Czech agriculture is expected to remain increasingly dependent on foreign workers (Ministerstvo zemědělství České republiky, 2023). Foreign experience confirms the positive impact of in-migrants on rural development; Kalantaridis and Bika (2006) show that in-migrants in rural England replace the outgoing younger generation, develop businesses and create new jobs. Younger generations may also be motivated to return to the countryside through targeted economic and environmental projects (Ježek, 2020, p. 35). At the same time, the experts agree that agriculture will continue to play an important role in rural development through greening, organic production, regional products and direct sales, with possible further strengthening through the development of community energy and through new opportunities created by climate change. These findings correspond with McElwee and Bosworth (2010), who show that successful agricultural diversification beyond commodity production requires specific entrepreneurial and strategic skills on the part of farmers.

The last area addressed by the research concerns the role of subsidies in the current situation of rural businesses. The experts consider subsidies a tool that allows the countryside to maintain the provision of services and goods that would not be sustainable under normal market conditions. The development of entrepreneurial activity in the Czech countryside relies on a range of subsidy instruments, which the experts comment on as a whole rather than by individual schemes. At the same time, the President of the Supreme Audit Office points out that the current subsidy system is unmanageable, distorts the market environment and requires fundamental revision (Nejvyšší kontrolní úřad, 2023, p. 5). According to Josef Polák (Vorobljevová, 2023, Appendix F), however, supported enterprises would achieve significantly worse economic results without support. Audit No. 21/33 of the Supreme Audit Office (Nejvyšší kontrolní úřad, 2022) further indicates that the system favours larger enterprises, which face simpler conditions and a wider range of subsidy options than small and medium-sized businesses (Binek et al., 2009, p. 42).

5.2 Conclusion

The Delphi research concerned the Czech countryside. This allowed the research to capture a wide range of expert perspectives on the main dimensions of rural entrepreneurship. In the theoretical part, attention is given to peripheral rural areas, as these face the most significant challenges regarding the future of entrepreneurship.

Regarding the main objective and sub-objectives, the research yielded several conclusions. In the area of innovation, automation and digitalisation, the future of rural economic entities depends primarily on the level of education and technological literacy of the local population and on the quality of broadband and digital infrastructure, while the diffusion of innovations is slower in rural areas. New trends bring both new business and job opportunities, and the disappearance of some traditional ones. The quality of transport infrastructure significantly influences rural entrepreneurship. It represents one of the main barriers in rural areas, while improved transport accessibility is a key prerequisite for further development. Population ageing is perceived as a significant problem for securing the workforce in rural businesses, especially in physically demanding activities, and is expected to affect rural areas more than urban ones. Agriculture will remain an important part of rural development, particularly through greening, organic production, regional products and direct sales. At the same time, its competitiveness is weakened by demographic change and the sector's limited appeal to young workers. Subsidies enable the functioning of rural businesses and basic services, although the current system is perceived as inefficient and disadvantageous for small and medium-sized enterprises.

Based on these conclusions, several recommendations can be formulated. For public policy, attention should be paid to investment in digital literacy and broadband infrastructure, to improving municipal transport accessibility, to supporting generational renewal and the modernisation of agriculture, and to revising the subsidy system in favour of small and medium-sized enterprises. For rural businesses, strengthening cooperation with the local

community and using place-based resources, in line with the concept of rural entrepreneurship (Korsgaard et al., 2015), represents an important direction.

Limitations and future research. The main limitations of the study are the relatively low number of participating mayors and the open-ended nature of the Delphi responses. Since the Delphi questions focused on the countryside in general, the research did not delve into the specifics of rural peripheries. Future research could focus directly on peripheral rural areas and on themes not included in the Delphi questionnaire, in particular, rural tourism, rural trade, and food deserts.

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