

Sustainability of Rural Areas _

Exploring Values, Challenges, and Socio-Cultural Role

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ABSTRACT

In spite of the challenges that rural areas encounter today, their characteristics are of great importance globally. From food production to natural, social, and cultural values, and to distinctiveness and diversity, rural areas play an essential role in the sustainable development of global society, and therefore, the preservation of such areas is necessary. Starting from the consideration of the 'rural' concept, this paper identifies and describes the main values of rural areas, further discusses their major contemporary challenges, and finally explores the paths towards more sustainable rural environments, offered through the research work, policies, strategies, development plans, etc. The importance of the social dimension of rural sustainability has been recognised, and particular attention in the work has been assigned accordingly to the characteristics of rural communities. Having regarded that the major part of contemporary spatial research focuses on the urban environment, which is accompanied by decreased interest in rural studies, the intention is to contribute to the alleviation of this recognised imbalance.

KEYWORDS rural area, rural community, value, sustainability, strategy

1 Introduction

In the literature, the notion of 'rural' is most often defined by contrasting the notion of 'urban'. For example, Ratcliffe, Burd, Holder, and Fields (2016) consider a *rural area* as any geographic area that is outside of small towns. This would mean that every non-urban area is rural. Such observation, nevertheless, does not offer the clarification of this notion, especially when considering the global transition from rural to urban, which contributed to the emergence of mixed settlements that are neither urban nor rural, or are both urban and rural.

The determinants of human settlements are changing through time, together with socio-economic circumstances. This leads to the continuous remodelling of the perception of rural and urban areas. Today, different countries around the world establish their own definitions of rural areas, which are most often based on determined thresholds of population density and the accompanying economic and social conditions, and obtained by statistical analyses of administrative units. In Canada, for example, a rural area is a territory located outside a settlement of at least 1000 inhabitants and with a population density of at least 400 citizens per square kilometer (Statistics Canada, 2009). In the United States, a rural area has fewer than 2500 inhabitants and a population density that can vary as much as 999 to 1 person per square mile (Womach, 2005, p. 223). A rural area in the UK is that which is outside a settlement of more than 10000 inhabitants (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, 2016). With the aim of making a consistent basis, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has developed a new regional typology that classifies the regions of member countries into 'predominantly rural', 'intermediate' and 'predominantly urban' regions (Directorate for Public Governance and Territorial Development, 2011). The first step of OECD classification methodology consists of identifying the local rural units with a population density below 150 inhabitants per square kilometre (or 500 inhabitants for Japan and Korea, to account for the fact that the national population density in these two countries exceeds 300 inhabitants per square kilometre). According to the share of the population living in rural local units, the regions are later classified as predominantly urban (the share below 15%), intermediate (if the share of the population is between 15% and 50%), and predominantly rural (if the share is higher than 50%).

Although population density represents a significant indicator, its exclusive utilisation in distinguishing urban from rural is insufficient. In actuality, the word 'rural' is affiliated to many different meanings (Hart, Larson, & Lishner, 2005). Pizzoli and Gong (2007) have argued that the joint use of other factors such as agriculture and economic specialisation, human resources and skills, land cover, and spatial dimensions of social life, would significantly improve accuracy in the approximation of probability of areas being either rural or urban. Following population density, agricultural landscapes, high vegetation, open spaces, low density of buildings, underdeveloped infrastructure, individual houses, low-rise buildings, and integration of living and other

functions (Konečný, n.d.) are only physical or material characteristics of rural areas, while the aspects that concern social construct, economic situation, and traditional and cultural values account for immaterial or intangible characteristics.

2 Why Does Rural Matter?

In spite of challenges that rural areas encounter today, their characteristics are of great importance globally. From food production to natural, social, and cultural values, and to distinctiveness and diversity, rural areas play an essential role in the sustainable development of global society. To preserve rural areas, it is crucial to highlight their values and to address the problems that jeopardise these values (Section 3), so that the possibilities for solutions can be explored (Section 4). In this regard, the recognised values of rural areas are listed in Fig. 2.1.

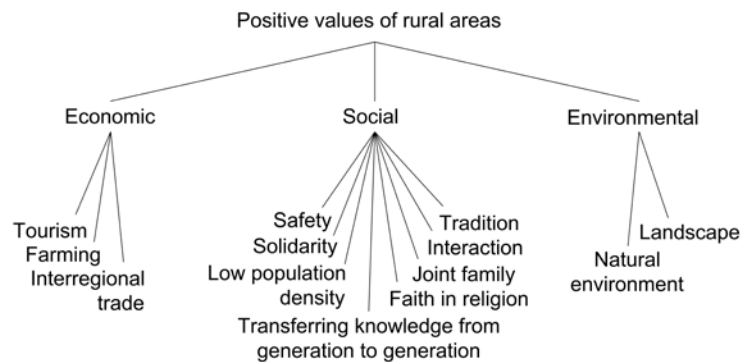


FIG. 2.1 The values of rural areas

By comparing urban and rural areas in the United States, Berry and Okulicz-Kozaryn (2013) have concluded that people who live in small towns and rural peripherals are happier than those in large cities. For Okulicz-Kozaryn (2015a), lower population density contributes to the feeling of happiness, while urbanisation is connected with the feeling of dissatisfaction. Further, Lederbogen, Haddad, and Meyer-Lindenberg (2013) have argued that high population density and overcrowding in urban areas leads to an increase in violence, a loss of work, and a sense of insecurity and danger. In contrast to the natural ambience of rural areas, the lack of vegetation and high concentration of environmental pollutants in urban areas aggravate physical and mental health and wellbeing. According to results of the study presented by Schaller (2012, pp. 36-39), higher level of stress in urban areas can be connected to a higher level of measured blood pressure, compared to rural areas.

Social interaction between rural residents is characterised by greater stability and continuity, because of more profound relationships and more face-to-face contact. Common experiences, customs, traditions, and knowledge shared between the inhabitants of rural areas thus represent the foundations of rural communities, and the transfer of these values from generation to generation helps to preserve rural



A

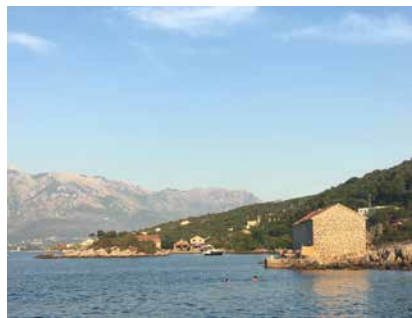


B

FIG. 2.2 A+B: Traditional houses in village Sredska, a distinctive representation of material rural culture



A



B



C

FIG. 2.3 Diversity of rural landscapes: (A) productive landscape on Kosovo plain, (B) coastal rural landscape, fishermen's hamlet Bjelila in the Bay of Kotor, and (C) rural settlement Ljubinja on Šar-Mountain.

culture and identity, and hence diversity. On the one hand, cultural diversity means more flexibility, less vulnerability, strengthened resilience, and therefore better social stability (Lisocka-Jaegermann, 2006), while on the other hand it can also be significant in improving the sustainability of ecosystems (Berkes & Folke, 1994).

While local knowledge and other traditional cultural values such as customs, personal values, beliefs and norms of rural communities represent intangible rural heritage, traditional handcrafts, significant buildings and other heritage artefacts and sites form parts of material rural culture (Fig 2.2). Rural landscape is a close determinant of rural areas (Fig 2.3). It includes both material-physical reality and immaterial existential values and symbols (Antrop, 2006). As such, rural landscape is not only a mere picture of the environment, but also a living and changing structure (Palang et al., 2006). For rural inhabitants, "landscapes appeared both as an expression of the farming systems and as the material basis of social, cultural, and political units" (Claval, 2005, p.13). The significance of rural landscape is reflected in the achievement of place attachment, strengthening the identity of a community, and improving its resilience (Palang et al., 2006).

Even though, nowadays, food production is notably less dependent on human resources, it still makes up a general characteristic of rural areas. Gardening, agriculture, and farming are important both for economic development of a country (Rural Regeneration, 2012) and for the local development of rural areas. Food production and local food markets therefore provide various economic and social benefits (Young-Chool & Hak-Sil, 2015; Feagan, Morris, & Krug, 2011; Brown & Miller, 2008).

3 Rural Issues Today

Contemporary problematic rural issues can be classified as economic, environmental, and social (Fig 3.1). Compared to the previously discussed values of rural areas, a major concentration of both values and challenges has been observed in the social domain. Such an observation assigns priority to the consideration of the social factors of rural sustainability. Nevertheless, casual relations between the three groups of identified problems require their holistic analysis.

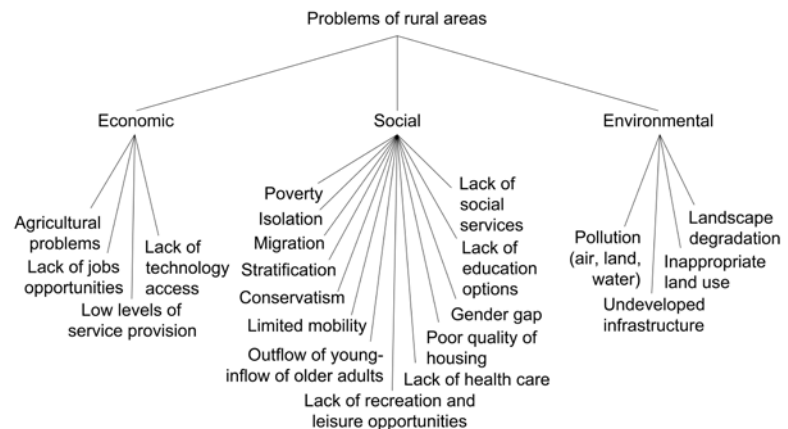


FIG. 3.1 Rural problems today

The process of deruralisation (also referred to as depopulation, rural flight, or rural exodus) represents the manifestation of migration of rural population, which many authors call ‘the new phase of globalization’ (Czaika & Haas, 2014; Overbeek, 1995; Stalker, 2000). On the other hand, migration is a consequence of different economic, social, or environmental problems existing in rural areas. If current trends of the depopulation of rural areas continue, the world could, according to predictions, become 100% urban by the year 2152 (Kovács, 2009, p. 20). The process of deruralisation could, therefore, cause the disappearance of a large part of cultural tradition, which would consequently result in a ‘poorer’ and monotone society with no identity (Kovács, 2009, p. 33). Having regarded that deruralisation is happening simultaneously with urbanisation, rural sustainability can only be reached simultaneously with urban sustainability (Bryant & Granjon, 2009).

The urbanisation of rural areas changes the habits, behaviours, and needs of rural inhabitants, and transforms rural culture. Uncontrolled

inflow of urban culture into rural areas affects local material and immaterial cultural heritage and causes the loss of rural traditions and local rural diversity.

Agricultural problems and the lack of job opportunities, technologies, and services in rural areas create economic challenges that can directly be connected to global concern with the increase of poverty and dissatisfaction with rural life. Rural economy is mainly dependent on natural resources. Horticulture, crop production, mining, farming, forestry, fishing (Surchev, 2010), and, more recently, tourism (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004), are the main sources of income for rural inhabitants. Inadequate maintenance and management, and community's attitude towards these resources intensively transform rural landscapes (Smith, Convery, Ramsey, & Kouloumpis, 2016) and cause unsustainable development of rural areas.

Inappropriate and uncontrolled land use and the lack of waste management in rural areas, commonly associated with small-scale, fragmented (Pašakarnis, Morley, & Maliene, 2013) agricultural production, result in pollution of air, water, and soil, while, from the other side, agricultural industrialisation and large-scale production reduce the number of people engaged in agricultural activities, thus reducing the employment opportunities for rural residents.

Agrarian landscape is nowadays subjected to transitions and transformation for many different reasons (e.g. Kosanović, Fikfak, & Popović, 2016; Lekić, 2015). This makes rural inhabitants "become more suspicious of change, as conditions in the present and for the future are unstable" (Palang et al., 2006, p. 353) and increases their vulnerability. Nevertheless, the degradation of rural landscapes may also happen because of the new residents who are not interested in rural values in the same way as farmers or permanent residents (Gorka, 2016).

Although a low-density built environment means more intensive presence of natural elements, it is, at the same time, often connected to undeveloped infrastructure, limited mobility of inhabitants, and consequently to their isolation. Rural poverty is not indicated only by the lack of job opportunities, but also by the fact that rural workers earn lower wages than urban workers (Thiede, Lichter, & Slack, 2016). Scotland's case study points to issues concerning the legitimacy of the influential rural institution of private land ownership and its governance approaches, highlighting the lack of community involvement in estate management (McKee, 2015). Poverty, migration from village to city, limited mobility of inhabitants, lack of health care and education, poor quality of housing, outflow of young people and inflow of older adults, differences in status between men and women, lack of social services, lack of leisure and recreation opportunities, conservatism and stratification are all current concerns of rural communities. To achieve rural sustainability, it is necessary to conceptualise new visions of the overall way of living, and not only to those that relate to economy and technology (Čolaković – Prguda, 2015). If human consciousness and lifestyles do not change, their relation to environmental, economic, and social concerns in favour of sustainability will not improve.

4 Towards Sustainability of Rural Areas

Sustainability-related plans for rural areas should primarily address the prevention of further deruralisation. To that end, it is believed that the intensification of research about social-cultural issues could assist in providing better outcomes towards the achievement of sustainability of rural areas.

According to Viederman (1993, p. 37), the community is of crucial importance for survival. Assuming that “rural sustainability, like urban, is a social construction” (Bryant & Granjon, 2009, p. 162), the sustainability of rural communities should be understood as a cornerstone of the sustainability of rural areas.

Whether it is a place of living or work, interests, attitudes, actions, habits, or customs, community is characterised by shared commonality. To form and sustain a community, according to Peck (1987), means to cross a path from pseudo-community where the politeness is dominant, to chaos – when the emotional skeleton goes out, to emptiness – the time of silence and transition, to the real community marked by deep respect and care. However, nowadays, this process is interrupted, and even reversed, for different reasons. For example, Okulicz-Kozaryn (2015b) explains how community disappears as the size of the city and the capital increase. This can further be connected to the shifts in identity and belonging as important agents that bond communities from the inside. Therefore, there are certain codes of behaviour and, more deeply, the desired emotions (like empathy) connected to identity and attachment, that play a role in sustaining the existing and building new, sustainable, rural communities. The inevitable process of urbanisation must be redirected from undermining to enhancing the survival of rural communities.

Daskon and Binns (2009, p. 494) have pointed out the importance of interaction of culture, sustainability of living conditions, and community development. According to these authors, the transfer of traditional cultural values to future generations is crucial to strengthening the safety of a community, and to its sustainability. Previously, Berkes and Folke (1994, p. 7), argued that local knowledge allows people to cope with the challenges inherent in their environment. By using traditional skills and knowledge, a community adapts better to newly emerging situations, which strengthens its resilience (Daskon & Binns, 2009). As tangible and intangible values of an area are entangled in landscape, it represents an important segment of community identity. “Local traditional communities have a strong identity, clearly expressed by the landscape and landmarks” (Claval, 2005, p.18). For these reasons, the preservation of agrarian landscape as cultural heritage must be prioritised in sustainability strategies.

4.1 An Overview of Strategies and Research Findings

Early concerns for rural areas in different international agendas have been expressed in terms of: proper management, planning and improvement of rural settlements, educational programmes, agricultural waste management, improvement of agricultural mechanisation, and exchange of knowledge and experiences in agricultural skills (United Nations, 1972); promotion of sustainable agriculture and rural development by initiating increased food production, improving its security in a sustainable way, using economic encouragements and developing new technologies (United Nations, 1992); inviting various institutions, agencies, government and non-governmental organisations to help boost productivity and farmers on a sustainable basis (Economic and Social Council, 1995, p. 40); etc. A growing interest in rural issues on a global scale was expressed at the Rio+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, organised in 2012, where a need to create a policy that will strengthen sustainable forms of agriculture by transforming unsustainable, industrial farming practices into systems that protect biodiversity, increase soil fertility, and ensure safe and nutritious food for all have been initiated (United Nations, 2012).

Recent recognition of the social problems in rural areas has resulted in the development of a number of strategies, plans, policies, and various forms of activities aimed at enhancing the development of sustainable rural communities worldwide (e.g. Housing Executive, 2016; Partnership for Sustainable Communities, 2011; The Irish Rural Dwellers Association, 2012; The Rural Coalition, 2010).

Researchers advocate various possibilities of promoting the sustainability of rural areas while assigning a central role to rural communities, such as: age-friendly and inter-generational support within the community (Spina & Menec, 2013; Camarero, Cruz, & Oliva, 2014); improvement of educational opportunities and family role for young adults to remain in their rural communities (Homan, Hedrick, Dick, & Light, 2014); contribution of rural businesses and social enterprise that increase job opportunities in rural areas (Steinerowski & Steinerowska-Streb, 2012; Steiner & Atterton, 2014, 2015); importance of local leaders role and their relationship with the processes of governmentality (Beer, 2014); importance of community landownership for reconstructing rural development in a sustainable manner (McMorran, Scott, & Price, 2014); the benefits of rural branding (Eugenio-Vela & Barniol-Carcasona, 2015; Swinney, Lang, & Runyan, 2012); etc. According to Swinney, Lang, and Runyan (2012, p. 43), the “strength of feelings between residents can guide further community development”, and work on place branding, with community involvement, can strengthen its identity and influence economic development. Another research study has shown the significance of collective memory in the development of community identity and the perception of, and method of coping with, environmental threats (Messer, Shriver, & Adams, 2015). For Sunblad and Sapp (2011, p.531), “practices and development strategies that create greater levels of interaction among and between neighbours might prove to strengthen local residents’ attachment to

their communities". Community attachment is also related to the "lower odds of problem substance use and delinquency in rural youth" (Van Gundy, Stracuzzi, Rebellon, Jenkins Tucker, & Cohn, 2011, p.293), while having a connection to place "highlights the people-place relationships that are a driving force for sustainable practice" (Baldwin, Smith, & Jacobson, 2017, p. 39). Thus, primary sense of empathy, strong identity, and attachment capacity are the characteristics of rural communities that improve their resilience and sustainability.

The study of rural areas in central Italy reveals the importance of traditional farming systems and several other activities such as craftsmanship in contributing to the sustainability of rural areas, proposing strategies that "would be capable of strengthening residents' sense of place and transforming the local community into a more resilient and adaptive socio-ecological system" (Gobattoni, Pelorosso, Leone, & Ripa, 2014, p. 412). Another study, referring to the context of economic crisis, resulted in a set of factors, closely linked to the resilient character of the territories, according to which rural areas may develop (Sánchez-Zamora, Gallardo-Cobos & Ceña-Delgado, 2014).

The potential of rural tourism and its contribution to spatial development on local and regional levels have also been widely recognised (e.g. Gadžić, 2016). According to Reeder & Brown (2005, p. i), "tourism development contributes to rural wellbeing, increasing local employment, wage levels, and income, reducing poverty, and improving education and health".

Pender, Weber, and Brown (2014) have pointed out the necessity of better data and research on rural wealth creation and the importance of using the approaches that are suited to particular rural areas and, furthermore, gave an insight to contextual factors and wealth endowments influencing potential for emerging energy industries. Van Berkel and Verburg (2010) have emphasised notable variations between European regions regarding rural development and proposed an approach that "draws upon a number of theoretical and descriptive studies and expert knowledge which is translated into rural development capacities and presented in maps" that would "offer policymakers an alternative perspective to target rural development policy and by understanding diverse rural potentials for multiple and mono-functionality uses" (van Berkel & Verburg, 2010, p. 457-458).

In a brief analysis of several European innovative projects for rural areas, Esparcia (2014, p. 1) has noticed that "some findings suggest that innovation is particularly common in food production, as well as in the environmental and energy sectors". An evaluation study of the implementation of the *European Innovation Partnership* for agricultural productivity and sustainability shows that the "bottom-up and farmer-led approach is truly distinctive and highly appreciated by stakeholders" (European Union, 2016, p. 2). In addition, evidence from a number of studies (Glasbergen, 2000; Gertler, 2001; Steinerowski & Steinerowska-Streb, 2012; Steiner & Atterton, 2014, 2015) shows positive outcomes

from the influences that rural private enterprises and rural cooperatives have on rural sustainable development.

Nevertheless, some studies reveal the shortcomings of current rural development policies and their application. Exploring the application of the EU rural development policy, in the context of territorial cohesion perspective, in the case of the Czech Republic during the long-term period of 2004–2013, Pelucha, Kveton, and Safr (2015, p. 26) noticed that “EU’s rural development policy is not a policy of development or broad-based rural”, as it is rather applicable to agricultural aspects. Sotte, Esposti, and Giachini (2012) pointed to the problem of putting a focus on agricultural development in the time of ‘post-industrial rurality’, and suggested that the policy-makers should cooperate more intensively with researchers in order to make rural development policies more effective. The document *Policy Recommendations for Sustainable Rural Communities in Europe* explored the energy challenges of rural areas, finding that the EU policy framework has insufficiently explored these issues (Future of Rural Energy in Europe, 2012). In addition, this document acknowledges the possibilities and justifies proposals to reduce the weight of energy expenses on rural households, which would have a series of benefits for rural society. It is necessary to re-examine the priorities that contribute to the sustainability of rural areas and their communities. Therefore, a transdisciplinary approach to planning for the sustainability of rural communities and the implementation of a greater number of strategies targeting specific areas are necessary.

5 Conclusions

Compared to the urban environment, the rural environment offers greater natural diversity, better contact with the natural environment, healthier places, cultural specificity, nurtured tradition, traditional values, and rich heritage. This idyllic rural picture, however, undergoes intensive changes with the onset of global urbanisation that immeasurably transforms the rural environment, together with a number of its economic, social, and environmental determinants. Therefore, any consideration of rural areas is essentially a consideration of their survival, endurance, and sustainable transformation. The socio-cultural role of rural areas in these states is crucial, as evidenced by a number of studies that seek opportunities for improving rural environments and preserving positive rural values as parts of global cultural tangible and intangible heritage. The purpose of social characterisation is to firstly assist in achieving the sustainability of rural communities, and then to actively engage sustainable communities in achieving the sustainable development of rural areas.

Several obstacles and challenges have been set in front of the goal of achieving rural sustainability. They concern the insufficiency of applicable strategies and often inadequate application of adopted strategies, a large number of narrowly profiled research studies that do not examine the problem systemically, as well as the introduction of

new contemporary spatial theories that tend to change the concept of rurality in relation to its entire history. This paper has shown that the importance of rural areas for global sustainable development is high, and that, accordingly, the primary set of actions for sustaining them should be directed towards reducing the trend of deruralisation. At the same time, it is necessary to raise awareness of the importance of rural areas worldwide and to engage significantly larger number of experts, researchers, policymakers, governmental and non-governmental organisations in the processes of solving the contemporary rural issues. Although the actions towards sustainability of rural communities, and therefore towards sustainable development of rural areas, should simultaneously target economic, environmental, and socio-cultural aspects, effective and proactive approaches to problem solutions should be tailored according to local barriers, priorities, potentials and goals, having considered contextual specificities and the diversity that needs to be preserved.

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