

POLICY, PRACTICE AND THE EXPERIENCES OF NEWCOMERS IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

Newcomers play a vital role in driving rural development, making attracting new residents essential for sustainable regional growth. As a result, the role of newcomers in rural areas, their attraction and integration are becoming increasingly important areas both in scientific research and within political discourse. This study aims to assess the relationship between measures included in policy planning documents for attracting residents and the practical experiences of newcomers in rural areas. By applying qualitative content analysis and analysing a range of national and regional level planning documents, the research delves into if and how the attraction of newcomers to rural areas and their integration into local communities are incorporated into these plans and policies. Simultaneously, the study explores the perspectives of newcomers based on previously published interviews, providing insight what attracts them to rural area and what are the challenges they encounter during the relocation process. The results reveal that policy planning documents mention attracting residents to rural areas as one of the priorities, and various support measures are planned to attract newcomers, including improving the quality of life, developing entrepreneurship, and providing social services. Analysis of practical experiences reveals a consistent disconnect between the measures outlined in planning documents and their effective implementation, thereby increasing the susceptibility of rural areas to depopulation.

Keywords: rural areas, newcomer attraction, place based policy.

Introduction

In recent years the role of more place-based approach in rural development increases in many European countries (Horlings, 2018; Vasta et al., 2019). In the context of rural depopulation, the role of municipal level population strategies, responsibility of municipality to attract new residents in many rural municipalities increases. Rural municipalities under depopulation more often are framed negatively in public discourse, and they could potentially pave the way towards alternative solutions and plans for local demographical strategies (Syssner & Siebert, 2020). The role of newcomers in rural areas and their integration are becoming increasingly important areas both in scientific research and within political discourse. Newcomers are a significant human resource asset for any rural community, especially in remote and depopulated rural areas (Bijker & Haartsen, 2012; Gieling et al., 2017). The vision, knowledge, skills and experience of newcomers enrich and empower local communities, contribute to the spread of remote work in the countryside, the creation of new economic practices, the development and recognition of places/territories (Dopitová, 2016; Goodwin-Hawkins et al., 2022; Kruzmetra & Bite, 2023; Merrell et al., 2022 a, 2022b; Piša & Hruška, 2019). Therefore, a place-based approach is also appropriate for addressing demographic challenges. Place based approach means that detailed local contexts are considered, resulting in development of specific solutions for each location. Place-based approaches argue that all places have untapped potentials to grow and that policies should consider a place's context and its diversity, it is spatially-aware policy (Barca, 2009; Hildreht & Bailey, 2014; Varga, 2017; Vasta et al., 2019).

One of the main elements in place-based approach is integrated planning. Effective rural development requires a holistic approach that integrates economic, social and environmental considerations. Place-based planning ensures that all these aspects are harmonized, promoting balanced and sustainable growth. Engaging local stakeholders, including residents, businesses and community organizations is crucial. Their intimate knowledge of the area's strengths and challenges allows for more relevant and effective development plans.

A place-based approach contributes by stimulating various local practices through policies as well as place-based policies and tools that let local resources to be the source of development. Place-based policy is an effective strategy to address these challenges by focusing on the unique characteristics and needs of specific areas, fostering sustainable development and revitalization, renewal of local society, attraction of newcomers. A place-based development policy can be defined as a long-term development strategy whose objective is to reduce persistent inefficiency (underutilisation of the full potential) and inequality (share of people below a given standard of well-being and/or extent of interpersonal disparities) in specific places (Barca, 2009).

Place based framework identifies two potential institutional weaknesses. Firstly, a tendency to lack both an understanding and knowledge of local places. This is identified in the literature as lacking a 'sense of community', which is a form of social capital that understands the local institutional context in which development takes place (Barca et al., 2012; Tabellini, 2010). Secondly, place based framework reveals weakness of capacity to adapt approach to mediate local consensus and trust between local actors as well as mobilize local resources effectively (Rodriguez-Pose & Storper, 2006).

At the same time recently it is possible to observe citizen-led initiatives, renewed interest in community, place, and 'local identity' (the privatization of public services; a re-emergence of the social economy; and tensions between 'bottom-up' initiatives and the changing role of the state). The co-production of governments and initiatives can potentially result in a shift from government-led to community-led planning (Silva et al., 2018). This research focuses on the policies and practices used against depopulation on municipality level, to increase the understanding on how municipalities work to counter depopulation, because the issue of depopulation is one of the most important challenges for many rural municipalities in Europe as well as in Latvia.

The aim of the research is to assess the relationship between measures included in policy planning documents for attracting residents and the practical experiences of newcomers in rural areas.

To achieve the aim, the following tasks have been set: (1) to investigate whether and how policy planning documents incorporate plans and measures aimed at attracting new residents to rural areas and (2) to analyse the practical experiences of newcomers to rural areas, to identify what attracts them to rural area and the challenges they encounter during the relocation process.

Materials and Methods

In order to assess the relevance of attracting newcomers to rural areas within policy planning documents, a qualitative content analysis method was selected for this research. This entailed the analysis of long-term and medium-term national policy documents, specifically the Sustainable Development Strategy of Latvia 2030 (hereinafter – Latvia 2030) and the National Development Plan of Latvia 2021-2027 (hereinafter – NDP 2027). Additionally, regional development programs for the planning regions of Kurzeme, Latgale, Vidzeme, and Zemgale (2021-2027), alongside the current development programs of all 36 municipalities in Latvia, were examined. The analysis evaluated whether and how these documents mention the attraction of newcomers to rural areas, whether specific measures are planned for their attraction and retention, and whether the integration of newcomers into the local community is reflected.

Content analysis as a research method was also applied to explore the lived experiences of newcomers in rural communities. The empirical study is based on published interviews with rural newcomers in the magazine 'Lauku māja' published between January 2024 and December 2024 (46 interviews in total were analysed), in which residents shared their experiences for relocating to rural areas and the challenges they encountered.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of policy planning documents

Rural areas, as an important living space for balanced

and sustainable national development, are defined in key national-level planning documents – **Latvia 2030** and **NDP 2027**, which outline the general guidelines for state development. According to the vision expressed therein, Latvia will, in the long term, be a prosperous state of active and responsible citizens, while urban-rural partnerships will ensure a high quality of life throughout the territory of Latvia. The vision emphasizes the promotion of regional development, which will create preconditions for the development of the economic potential of all regions and the reduction of socioeconomic disparities among their residents. Latvia 2030 sets out a total of seven national priorities, several of which are related to the development of rural areas as a place of residence and the attraction and retention of residents therein. One priority is related to investments in human capital, including the provision of development directions such as mitigating the risk of depopulation, resource accessibility for residents, and education accessibility. The document mentions that schools serve as social networking hubs. Although these measures are not explicitly attributed to rural areas in the document, these areas face the most significant population decline and the implementation of these goals is particularly critical for them. Similarly, the document sets a special spatial development perspective as a priority, which highlights the Rural Development Space as one of the national interest spaces. It is also envisaged that urban-rural relations and functional linkages should become closer, and the development of transport infrastructure and communication networks should be promoted. It is planned to create equal living and working conditions for all residents, regardless of their place of residence, by promoting entrepreneurship in the regions and developing quality transport and communication infrastructure and public services. Regarding rural residents, the achievable indicator is set at a minimum of 30% of Latvia's population living in rural areas. Similarly, the long-term strategy sets innovative governance and public participation as a priority and emphasizes the need for public participation in governance processes, as this activates local communities and promotes the social inclusion of individuals in local communities.

In order to achieve the long-term vision, set out in Latvia 2030, the **NDP 2027** has set four main national strategic goals - Productivity and Income, Equal Opportunities, Social Trust and Regional Development which applies directly also to rural areas. They provide equal opportunities to receive good education, qualitative healthcare, decent work and be socially protected regardless of place of residence in all regions of Latvia, including rural areas. In turn, the promotion of regional development is intended to achieve the development of regional potential, the reduction of socio-economic disparities, and the improvement of the business environment. Regarding social integration, the document emphasizes the need to promote public trust in fellow citizens, which will

create a society in which everyone feels a sense of belonging and responsibility, thus increasing the common public good. The document mentions self-organization and cooperation skills and experience as essential for community cohesion, for example, participating in public organizations and doing volunteer work.

NPD 2027 also discusses in more detail the perspective of the **Rural Development Space** set out in Latvia 2030. It mentions the diversification of the economy in rural areas as a development direction in order to maintain rural population and reduce emigration, implementing interaction and cooperation with development centres. It also emphasizes the advantages of Latvia as a country rich in bioresources and the need to develop the use of bioresources in cross-sector partnerships in the production of high-quality, export-capable, high-value-added products. A significant role is also intended for strengthening community groups in order to maintain both urban and rural populations and promote an increase in living standards, to increase involvement in processes important to society, to promote civic interest and participation, and to promote mutual support initiatives.

Analysis of the development priorities outlined in **regional and municipality level development programs** reveals that local governments aim to attract **new residents through the following instruments**:

- improvement of the life quality - municipalities develop infrastructure, improve the availability of social services, ensure attractive living conditions and a family-friendly environment;
- promotion of education and employment - municipal scholarships are offered to young specialists, courses and training are organized, as well as career development measures are developed;
- improvement of housing accessibility – various programs for housing accessibility and rental support measures for young specialists, teachers and healthcare workers are developed;
- supporting entrepreneurship and attracting investment - municipalities develop industrial zones, offer support mechanisms for young entrepreneurs and organize marketing campaigns to promote local businesses;
- public involvement and strengthening the local community - organized resident forums, public consultations and surveys to promote the participation of young residents in the development of the municipality;
- improved accessibility of social and health services - health care centers are being developed and support programs are being created to attract doctors, especially to more remote areas.

The planning documents also provide **measures to attract new specialists**. For example, tax breaks and financial support are provided for young specialists - municipal grant programs for young entrepreneurs and

specialists who want to start their own business. Various support measures for home production and small business are also provided, as well as tax breaks for entrepreneurs to motivate them to stay in the municipality. In their planning documents, local governments prioritize the recruitment of specialists within the education and healthcare sectors, specifically through scholarships for young professionals, especially teachers and medical personnel, with obligations to work in the municipality after graduation. It is also planned to create housing support programs, such as rental subsidies, that are offered to teachers and doctors.

In addition, in order to retain young people in the regions, youth employment promotion programs are being created. For example, there are:

- 1) financial support during and after studies: several regions implement scholarship programs that motivate young specialists to return after studies and work in a specific municipality;
- 2) professional education and career development opportunities: school career advisors actively encourage young people to choose specialties in demand in the region, such as medicine and education;
- 3) creation of jobs and internships: municipalities cooperate with local entrepreneurs to provide internships for young people;
- 4) some municipalities have developed a voluntary work system that gives young people their first work experience and improves employment prospects;
- 5) support for youth entrepreneurship: young people's business ideas are stimulated by municipal grant programs that provide financial support to young entrepreneurs;
- 6) non-formal education and training programs: organized courses and training that help young people develop skills needed for the labor market.

The analysis of municipality development programs highlights a correlation between municipal size and the observed trends in attracting new residents. In **large municipalities with more than 40,000 inhabitants**, economical aspects such as attracting business and investment is dominant. Housing accessibility improvement is also an important aspect - new residential projects and rental support programs are being developed. In **medium-sized municipalities** (20,000 – 40,000 inhabitants), development strategies are more versatile, as they combine economic stimulation with improving the quality of life. These municipalities try to ensure a balanced approach between quality of life, education and entrepreneurship. There is a strong emphasis on local community development and citizen participation in municipal decisions, as well as participatory budgeting programs. According to this study in **small municipalities** (under 20,000 inhabitants), development programs focus on retaining residents and mitigating demographic decline which was not so visible in the development programs of larger

municipalities. The main emphasis in them is on the development of local businesses and agriculture. Such municipalities try to attract new residents with housing support programs and initiatives to attract specialists. Promoting remigration is also an important strategic goal - support measures are organized to return residents who have left. Emphasis is placed on strengthening the local community - participation of residents in municipal decisions and support for public activities.

Experiences of newcomers in rural area

The analysis of practical experiences confirms that the **reasons why residents choose to move to the rural areas** can be classified into several groups. One of them is related to (1) **personal desires for a change in lifestyle**. This may be related to the desire for peace and greater privacy of living space. For many, life in the city has caused fatigue, stress and burnout; therefore, moving to the rural area has seemed like an opportunity to escape from that. The desire for the presence of nature in everyday life is also important for Latvians: 'Why do people need the countryside? To remember where we all came from, to be closer to the land. Namely, the countryside gives more grounding, an understanding of who you are and where you come from'. Another important factor is sentiment and the romanticization of rural life, which is significantly influenced by childhood memories of carefree time spent in the countryside. It is important to note that this empirical analysis is primarily based on middle-class residents, which may lead to a more positive look on rural life compared to those from lower socio-economic groups.

The second reason for changing residence to the rural area is related to (2) **family circumstances**. The desire for a safer living space and proximity to nature is significantly created by the arrival of children in the family. 'Over time, you, a person, mature and understand that, for example, you do not want to raise children in Riga. 'In the countryside' [...] at least the children will be able to go out into the countryside, they will be able to keep chickens there and grow a minimum of food in the garden. 'Similarly, the expansion of the family creates a greater emotional connection with one's family, thus often a desire arises to return to family home, preserve it and renovate it'. Often, the availability of family homes or the opportunity to purchase property close to one's hometown has been one of the main attractors for returning to the countryside.

An important factor in moving to the rural area is (3) **economic factors and the availability of properties**. Housing in the rural area is often cheaper than equivalent housing in the city, which is one of the decisive factors in choosing a place to live, especially for families with children. Practical experience shows that the rural area also has the potential to be a living space where you can create and develop a business. Some of the interviewees have developed home production, others have learned new skills in pottery processing and creating a pottery workshop, others

have created a metalworking workshop on their rural property. Several have acknowledged that local governments have also played an important role in the development of small businesses, both by offering premises and providing other types of support. It is mentioned that they have received significant support for the development of business thanks to the opportunities to write projects and receive financial resources from various European co-financing support funds available to rural residents. Similarly, rural tourism and hospitality are one of the areas that can provide additional income in rural areas. One of the interviewees admitted that he initially purchased a rural property with the aim of investing financial resources to create an airbnb-type dwelling and offer it to tourists. However, having invested so much of himself, the new place of residence became dear to him, and he did not want anyone to ruin it. The Covid-19 pandemic and the remote work opportunities it provided were a significant turning point that allowed for many to fulfill their dream of living in the rural area. It has allowed to maintain a connection with work and educational institutions in cities, while at the same time farming in the countryside, which has often also created a desire to stay in the countryside forever.

Practical experiences also reveal the biggest **challenges and difficulties** in the process of residents moving to the rural area. The identification of challenges constitutes a crucial factor in the future retention of newcomers within rural areas. One of the most significant challenges mentioned by newcomers to the rural areas is the accessibility of education. Families with children are concerned about the impact of school reforms and the potential closure of schools on their ability to continue providing their children with access to education close to their place of residence. 'Behind the cold Excel calculations and inevitable change slogans stand real, living people and destinies. It is clear that there will be changes in the immediate vicinity, and not the kind that inspires choosing a rural life. Education and its convenient accessibility should be seen as an investment in our future. 'There is also an opinion that 'providing quality education and developing other talents while living in the countryside requires more investment than living in the city', as wider opportunities for children's education are still available in cities.

The availability of quality and affordable housing in rural areas is also often mentioned as a significant challenge for residents to move to the countryside. Several newcomers have admitted that finding suitable property has taken time. At the same time, several newcomers have acknowledged that the municipality has been interested and has provided support in the housing search process. Although properties in rural areas are empty, many of them are uninhabitable due to long-term uninhabited properties and require significant investment to improve them.

Despite the fact that newcomers have consciously chosen a more peaceful life in the countryside, several

of them admit that they feel a lack of social and cultural life in their new place of residence. 'One of the biggest challenges is the distance to the epicenters of social life. If there's a concert in the evening, then after coming home from work and sitting there for two hours, I won't want to drive the forty km back'. At the same time, empirical research reveals that socializing with local residents and neighbors plays a particularly important role in rural areas. Most newcomers highly valued close neighborly relations and mutually beneficial support in various everyday situations, such as lending equipment, clearing roads in winter, or driving to the store together. This shows that the social integration of newcomers in rural areas has been successful.

Additional challenges for newcomers to rural areas are posed by disorganized infrastructure, including roads in poor condition. This makes it difficult for residents to reach the administrative centers of the regions, where the most essential daily services are concentrated, and also makes it difficult to develop small businesses. In addition, high-quality internet access plays a very important role in the quality of life in rural areas and the development of entrepreneurship, which, according to newcomers, is something that could be improved in many remote regions.

Analysis of policy planning documents and practical experiences reveals that, in general, policy strategies are aimed at attracting newcomers to rural areas. They include the most important directions for newcomers, which can encourage new residents to move to the countryside, such as economical benefits, improvement of life quality and integration in local community. For example, the promotion of entrepreneurship in rural areas is one of the main priorities included in policy documents, the practical implementation and municipal support of which has been positively assessed by newcomers in rural areas. Newcomers in rural areas have also positively assessed the interest of municipalities in the housing search process, which is also defined as a priority in the planning documents of many municipalities. At the same time practical experiences reveal a consistent disconnect between the measures outlined in planning documents and their effective implementation. Newcomers often face limited social and cultural life opportunities in rural areas and poor-quality infrastructure. This indicates that, although the improvement of quality of life is emphasized in policy documents, in practice this goal is not always achieved. Similarly, the equal opportunities for access to education services for all, as defined in policy documents, do not always correspond to reality and pose a potential risk of further depletion of rural areas. In order to attract and retain newcomers in rural areas more effectively, it is necessary not only to include visions and priorities in policy documents, but also to ensure their effective implementation and take into account the real needs and challenges of residents. It is important not only to emphasize economic aspects, but

also to pay attention to social, cultural and infrastructure issues that are essential for the quality of life of newcomers in rural areas.

Additionally, examples from abroad indicate that location marketing campaigns can be successful in attracting new residents (Niedomysl, 2007), since they popularize the rural life idyll and a romantic perception of it, which, according to the analysis of practical experiences of this study, are some of the most crucial expectations urban residents have for living in rural areas. Unfortunately, the analysis of local government planning documents does not clearly indicate that these kinds of activities are included in their programs with the aim to attract new residents. Perhaps municipalities should place more emphasis on different types of location marketing initiatives.

The fact that municipalities, especially those with the smaller amount of residents, plan actions for strengthening the local community in their strategies can be evaluated very positively, because sense of community often is a weak point of them. Also, experiences of newcomers confirm that activity of local community is very important for the successful integration of newcomers in rural areas. Studies (De Haan, 2019; Larsson, 2014) show that an active local community contributes to the efficiency of local governance. When residents are encouraged to feel a sense of belonging to a community, the prerequisites are created for them to take greater responsibility for their place of residence, their wellbeing and also physical living environments. In this way, a 'participation society' is created. According to De Haan (2019), entailing more active citizen participation, implies a change in role patterns, responsibilities and power relations for both residents and governments. Thus, it also benefits administrative institutions, basing the future development plan on the real needs of the municipality.

Conclusions

1. Rural areas as a living space and their inhabitants are identified in national planning documents as one of the priorities for balanced regional development.
2. In regional and local development strategies, the attraction of new residents is addressed through key action directions focused on: improvement of the quality of life, promotion of education and employment, improvement of housing accessibility, supporting entrepreneurship and attracting investment, public involvement and strengthening the local community, and improved accessibility of social and health services.
3. Differences in resident attraction measures can be observed between municipalities of varying sizes. In large and medium-sized municipalities, planning documents primarily focus on economic development, ensuring housing availability, and improving the quality of life for their residents. In contrast, the measures included in the planning documents of small municipalities are more practical and specifically aimed at retaining existing residents and attracting new ones.

4. The main reasons that attracts residents to rural areas are related to personal desires for a change in lifestyle (including the desire for peace and quiet), family circumstances and a reluctance to raise children in an urban environment, as well as economic factors and the availability of properties.
5. Although the most significant priorities for newcomers, which would attract them to relocate to rural areas, are included in various level policy planning documents, their practical implementation is

often not fully achieved and it poses a potential risk of further depletion of rural areas.

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