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Abstract

Social Infrastructure as Resilience: Rebuilding Civic Engagement and Social Cohesion in Depopulated Rural Regions

Jeannette Lind

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Rural depopulation represents one of the most pressing demographic and socioeconomic challenges of the modern era. As younger generations increasingly migrate to urban centers in search of economic and educational opportunities, rural territories face a compounding crisis of systemic disinvestment. This demographic drain accelerates the rapid decline of essential local services, commercial establishments, and local civic organizations. Consequently, the residents who remain in these peripheral regions are left profoundly isolated, severed from the traditional socio-spatial networks that historically sustained rural life. Decades of economic neglect and out-migration have effectively transformed towns that were once vibrant into "civic deserts;" geographic areas devoid of the institutional and informal spaces necessary to sustain public life.

When a region transitions into a civic desert, the consequences extend far beyond mere economic stagnation. The erosion of traditional community networks severely reduces the capacity of these vulnerable areas to adapt to, withstand, or recover from macroeconomic shocks, environmental disruptions, or ongoing demographic shifts. Without spaces for public life, the foundational social glue, territorial resilience, and social cohesion begin to fracture. This study addresses this critical vulnerability by framing "social

infrastructure" not merely as an amenity, but as an essential catalyst for community survival and regional adaptation. It explores how physical and digital networks intersect to mitigate the compounding damage of rural isolation.

This research investigates the mechanisms through which targeted interventions in social infrastructure can reverse the path of rural decline. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, this dissertation examines three distinct dimensions of infrastructure: traditional physical infrastructure like community centers, public libraries, and adaptive local gathering spaces; digital infrastructure including rural digital hubs, co-working spaces, and remote connectivity networks; and programmatic infrastructure encompassing structured community initiatives, local activation strategies, and civic programming. By analyzing diverse case studies of vulnerable rural regions, the study evaluates how these diverse layers of infrastructure function as a structural foundation for rural resilience. The primary objective is to determine how the design, accessibility, and management of these spaces directly influence local civic participation metrics and alleviate social isolation among diverse age demographics.

Ultimately, this dissertation offers a crucial, actionable framework for policymakers, regional planners, and grassroots organizers. It demonstrates that rural revitalization cannot be achieved through economic incentives alone; it requires deliberate, sustained investment in the social spaces that bring people together. By shifting the paradigm from managing rural decline to actively fostering resilience, this study provides a practical blueprint for restoring social cohesion, ensuring that depopulated rural regions possess the social fabric necessary to thrive in an unpredictable global landscape.