



Bottom-up initiatives and revival in the face of rural decline: Case studies from China and Sweden



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ABSTRACT

It is necessary for rural communities to meet conditions of decline, including depopulation, with effective strategies for rural revival and revitalisation. Based on Hirschman's 'exit-voice' theory, this paper investigates the way in which local stakeholders respond to processes of rural depopulation. Case studies undertaken in Xiaoguan village in China and in Åre in Sweden reveal the effectiveness of bottom-up revitalization initiatives in combating rural decline. We show how local stakeholders' strong "voices" in these places—which called for improved living conditions and increased job opportunities—held people and groups together, encouraging them to work together with shared values and attitude. The strong leadership demonstrated either by local committees or in stakeholders' self-organized actions played an important role in carrying out revitalisation initiatives. We highlight the importance of not only reviving economies but also creating desirable rural lifestyles. Our findings also emphasize the need for bottom-up initiatives to align with government policy and regional development plans.

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1. Introduction

The twentieth century constitutes a period of massive change—from the introduction of automobile to commercial air travel to the development of computer technologies, we have seen technology bring about shifts which have dramatically influenced the course of human life. Few changes have been as significant as the dramatic shift of population from rural to urban areas globally (Wood, 2008). To give some idea of the scope of this movement, we only have to look to the United States: whilst most Americans lived in rural communities in 1900, by the turn of the present century more than 80% of the population lived in urban areas. Similar trends can be seen in the countries of Europe since 1900, with rural depopulation accelerating in recent decades. According to the United Nations, the rural population of Europe fell from 207.3 million in 1985 to 192.8 million in 1995, and is projected to fall to 128.4 million by 2025.¹ The rural decline which accompanies these

processes of rural depopulation and urbanization can be seen in a drastic reduction in the quantity and quality of services available to rural citizens, an aging population, an articulated desire amongst young people to permanently leave rural areas, and the concomitant closure of schools in rural areas.

Unlike the countries of the developed world—countries like the US and Sweden, where urbanization often takes place at the expense of cities at lower levels in the urban hierarchy (Bontje, 2004; Schilling and Logan, 2008)—in the developing world, urbanization still takes place predominantly *at the expense of the countryside* (Westlund, 2014). As a result, the "hollowing out" of the countryside has become a widespread concern in many developing countries (Carr and Kefalas, 2009). The world's largest nation, China, has seen a mass migration of peasants to cities and an urbanization rate that has increased from 10.6% in 1949 to 52.6% in 2012; this development has induced challenges such as labour shortages, industrial recessions, a lack of infrastructure, loss of cultural heritage, and social conflicts (Liu et al., 2010; Sun et al., 2011; Long et al., 2011, 2012). The once self-sufficient villages have become hollowed out by these developments and many areas of rural China now exist in a state of decay.

"Counterurbanization", a "rural renaissance" was noted in many developed economies in the 1970s (Beale, 1975; Berry, 1976;

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¹ United Nations Human Settlements Programme, Tools and Statistics Unit: Europe, <http://ww2.unhabitat.org/habrrd/trends/europe.html>.

Champion, 1988) and the trend has been visible also thereafter in certain periods and areas. Countries that experienced this trend include the US (Nelson et al., 2010), the UK (Phillips et al., 2008), Australia (Gibson et al., 2005), New Zealand (Freeman and Cheyne, 2008), Sweden (Borgegård et al., 1995; Westlund, 2002) and Spain (Solana-Solana, 2010). Through this process, wealthy urban residents who were driven by a desire to escape the city and to connect to an idealised rural space became a key source of rural population growth (Nelson and Nelson, 2010).

Compared to the post-industrial countries of the developed world, China is currently undergoing rapid industrialization and urbanization, and Chinese cities still constitute the core areas for the agglomeration of resources like labour, capital, material and information (Li, 2012; Li and Zhang, 2013). Although the suburbanization witnessed in China in the late 1990s somewhat slowed the pace of rural depopulation (Zhou and Ma, 2000), this slowing predominantly reflected a form of urban expansion which urbanized suburban villages. Middle and upper-class urban residents who relocated to the suburbs were able to retain their jobs, and their business and social connections, whilst making use of better services and infrastructure than those available in the countryside (Li, 2011). Given these dynamics, rural decline is most pertinent in relation to smaller rural communities that are far away from urban areas. No real “rural renaissance” or “counterurbanization” has been seen in China to date.

Migration from the countryside to cities is a natural component of urbanization and industrialization. These processes bring economic benefits but also induce a range of social and environmental problems if the increased population mobility that drives them is achieved through a trade-off with increasing urban-rural inequality. For the world's largest country, the depopulation of rural areas has not only lead to severe social problems but also increasingly represents a threat to food security. Whilst other countries might solve issues of shortage through increasing their reliance on imports, China is prevented from such action due to the massive increase in global food prices such a strategy would produce, a situation which would be accompanied by a range of unforeseen consequences, especially for poor countries. The situation in Sweden is totally different, where agriculture is a marginal activity in large parts of the country. The depopulation of the Swedish countryside is mainly a social and cultural problem caused by weak labour markets. Besides alleviating these problems, rural revitalization in Sweden would mean pursuing a more efficient use of rural labour and other resources.

Diverse policies and measures have been introduced in countries across the world in order to try to meet the challenges presented by rural decline, including attempts to stimulate the rural economy by improving local infrastructures and restructuring dispersed settlement patterns (van der Ploeg et al., 2000; Cullingworth and Nadin, 2002; Hassebrook, 2003; Bjorna and Aarsaether, 2009; Natsuda et al., 2012). The risk faced in these top-down policy, planning and investment initiatives is, however, that they may fail to conform to the real needs of local populations. Learning from such failures, local governments in rural areas facing depopulation increasingly call upon the collective self-reliance of people to shape and maintain their own living environments (Elshof and Bailey, 2015). As Richard E. Wood (2008, pp. xvii) highlights in his book *Survival of Rural America*, “Broad public policy and planning initiatives are interesting and, in some cases, necessary, but in the end the success of most communities individually, and of rural America as a whole, will depend more on the actions and commitment of the people who live there.”

This paper investigates the role played by bottom-up initiatives in revitalising rural areas in response to conditions of rural decline. The second section of the paper reviews the reasons why rural

decline takes place and the forces that drive rural revival. In the third section, we analyse the role played by local stakeholders in rural revitalization, through two case studies: one in China and one in Sweden. The fourth section discusses the importance of bottom-up initiatives in rural revival and explores how such initiative can be made to work successfully.

2. Theoretical interpretation of rural decline and rural revival

2.1. The exit-voice dichotomy

Rural decline and possible rural revival are results of intertwined actions undertaken by individuals, private organizations (primarily companies) and political organizations. This study takes its point of departure from the proposition that urbanization is driven by differences in living standards between places—differences which themselves originate from differences in productivity between rural agriculture and urban industry and services. Private companies exploit these productivity differences by establishing and expanding their operations in cities. Politicians at various levels in turn support such development by creating favourable conditions for urban business growth. Such a pattern is then reinforced by the theory of circular and cumulative causation and the notions of the “centre” and “periphery” first propounded by regional development theorists such as Gunnar Myrdal (1957) and John Friedmann (1966).² According to this view, the growth of large urban centres contributes to the decline of small rural centres in a cumulative manner.

Individuals make the decision to move from the countryside to cities based on their consideration of information about labour markets and salaries, but also by virtue of other “soft” factors such as culture, career opportunities, social reasons, etc. In Hirschman's (1970) terms, based on this information, individuals make their choice to “exit” (to leave). For Hirschman, the notion of exit is framed within a dichotomy which sets it against the notion of “voice”—a term that stands for the alternative choice to (rather than leave) *stay* and take action to improve a situation. Hirschman's seemingly simple dichotomy can be, and has been, applied to virtually all areas of society: e.g., consumer behaviour, social relations, labour markets, associational membership, housing and migration. In this paper, we focus on the decision to migrate (“exit”) or stay and take action (“voice”).

While “exit” in this context denotes the act of leaving a rural community, the use of “voice” can take several forms. One form would be to initiate a new business activity as a complement to or replacement for existing agricultural activities, either as an individual or together with others. Another form would be to take political action with the aim of achieving politically sanctioned investments (for instance, in infrastructure or industry) in the rural area in question, and in this way kick-start or enhance processes that result in improved living standards.³ The extent to which such investments will be made depends on the strength of political pressure from below and on how these claims are received by political decision makers at higher levels.

What determines whether an individual chooses to exit or to use voice? Assuming that individuals' decisions are based on some

² Later on, these processes have been given more formalized, theoretical explanations by the New Economic Geography, e.g. in Krugman (1991) and Venables (1996).

³ “Voice” in public policy concerns of course not only the issues of depopulation that we focus on in this paper. For example, an application and development of the voice concept is Senecah's “practical theory of the trinity of voice” that treats “... multistakeholder, multiobjective needs in complex environmental public policy processes” (Senecah, 2004, p. 22).

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