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Population diversity and social cohesion: What works at the local level?

Having older and younger people as equal partners in designing and implementing local policies and planning activities is key to maintaining social cohesion and mitigating youth outmigration.

Cultural activities are fundamental in keeping local life and regions attractive. Administrations and cultural programmes should consider and allow newcomers and younger people to be part of local identity and cultural heritage.

Digitalisation can only achieve its promises if everyone is included: improvement in access to certain services and their reach can be realized if the necessary infrastructure is provided (for instance, a reliable Internet connection).

Many rural and remote areas can successfully attract newcomers to stay for the short or medium term and still benefit from a continuous influx of people, investments, ideas and resources, as motivations behind movement away from peripheral regions can be numerous (work or educational opportunities, starting a family, being closer to family or ethnic networks, etc.).

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Introduction

Europe's population composition has experienced many changes and continues to do so, for example in terms of the region of origin, educational attainment, family types, mental and physical health and age structure. More people than ever before are expected to live to a ripe old age. In most European countries, the birth rate remains low. At the same time, mobility within the European Union and immigration from non-EU countries are expected to increase; indeed, they will have to increase, as many European economies and social systems are already suffering from labour shortages. In addition to long-term demographic trends, unexpected events, such as pandemics, natural disasters and wars can cause sudden demographic changes and accelerate or stall those long-term tendencies.

In several meetings with experts from science, politics and society, the *Regional Population Diversity and Social Cohesion in the Local Context* project focused on reviewing recent population trends, the potential for policy changes, as well as possible best practices from a European comparative perspective. The goal of this policy brief is to summarise the policy-related results of this transdisciplinary and transnational dialogue. Based on the up-to-date scientific data and practical knowledge shared by 64 eminent experts, we provide an overview of the challenges and policy recommendations for local decision makers and community leaders.[1]

The needs and contributions of older and younger people

Youth outmigration from rural and remote areas has a significant impact on age structure, whereby the percentage of older residents increases and in most cases the population is shrinking. These population changes potentially increase the risk of disparities among rural and island communities, as the local administrations have to maintain the necessary health and care services with lower tax revenue. Older residents in such places, on the other hand, contribute to the local communities greatly in terms of social and economic entrepreneurship, volunteer work, mentoring, and carrying out care work for family and community members.

Local authorities play a crucial role in increasing trust in institutions, democracy and democratic values. To strengthen the ties between residents of all ages and administrations, the latter should not be afraid of risks, new players and new methods of citizen participation: open meetings, work-

shops, working group meetings, advisory boards, foresight workshops and citizens' panels. However, municipalities need sufficient financial resources to maintain social places in order to ensure participation and interaction among residents.

The importance of local ties

For younger as well as older citizens, access to culture is essential for a sense of belonging and for tackling loneliness and social isolation. Top-down approaches to cultural policies that do not pay attention to the specific particularities of a place may alienate local inhabitants, as they usually aim to attract tourists. Conversely, bottom-up initiatives to encourage cultural activities and increase the attractiveness of a place can be valuable in uniting communities around shared visions of development. However, even if an initiative or idea was successful in one place, this does not necessarily mean the same initiative or idea will work for another.

Cultural initiatives should be seen as long-term investments, and administrations can develop risk management strategies, including longer-term funding instead of too many short-term and unsustainable projects. Most cultural actions and innovative centres only have an impact in the long run and increase their influence over time, even if they might not have met the clear-cut outputs and expectations defined earlier.

Depopulation and provision of public services

Many rural and smaller urban areas are getting caught in a vicious cycle: as more working-age individuals leave an area, fewer resources become available for public administrations to provide services and maintain infrastructure (schools, sport and care facilities, etc.). As a consequence, these areas become less attractive for newcomers, are less appealing as locations for starting new businesses, and tend to lose younger residents through outmigration.

Municipal collaboration and administrative cooperation can be a key factor in overcoming these challenges: municipalities can work together and share responsibilities with civil society to enhance their respective capacities and extend their reach. They are open to cooperation in areas defined by high fixed costs and repetitive processes, like IT and

digitalisation, and requiring a high number of personnel and large amount of equipment, such as fire departments (Kratzmann, 2020). But they can also cooperate in the promotion of tourism, business development and culture. In all these spheres, trust between partners is a must, and this can be achieved through small-scale collaborative initiatives before moving on to large-scale projects.

Collaboration as well as national and EU funding programmes may require complex regulations and constraining legislation, which can discourage municipalities with limited resources and personnel. The removal of legal hurdles and the provision of consulting services and templates for applications, agreements and contracts can ease the workload of administrations.

Digitalisation for all

Technological advancements in health and social care can enhance the quality of life in regions with limited physical access to these services. Similarly, digital tools can promote new and better communication between community members and administrations. Locally or regionally hosted apps and platforms for communication can help residents to be better informed about public, private or community services (meetings, events, new places, changing service hours, job offers or offers of help, etc.) and bolster a sense of belonging and solidarity.

Citizens must be informed about the existence of digital services and how to use them confidently. Regardless of age, individuals with low digital skills or confidence must be considered and supported through digital services training. Success in one place can be a model for other places, provided that local needs are considered and any necessary adaptations are made. Co-creation, participatory development and the willingness of multiple actors to cooperate are important steps in defining and meeting those needs.

Evidence-based policies are crucial

Policymakers should not turn a blind eye to understanding the reasons for outmigration and to policies aimed at attracting return migrants (Brzozowska, Kuhn et al., 2021). Shared access to demographic data and good practices are key factors for administrations in meeting the changing needs of their residents. The coordination and effective dissemination of information through regional and European networks is valuable and helps avoid "reinventing the wheel". Regional population forecasts can be useful for local and regional administrations in short-term planning, e.g. in the areas of schools, nurseries and care facilities. However, when analysing population projections, deterministic conclusions about demographic trends should be avoided, as they can easily depict a pessimistic future and hinder investments in infrastructure.

Welcoming newcomers

Shrinking regions have different capacities to attract and retain newcomers as long-term residents. In addition, migrants vary from place to place: while in some regions, most work in agriculture, forestry, construction and domestic care (Bock, Osti and Ventura, 2016), others attract lifestyle-related inflows of pensioners or remote workers pursuing a more affordable or healthy life in rural areas (Čipin, Klüsener et al., 2020).

The involvement of multiple actors and the collaboration of administrations and residents can help achieve meaningful participation and inclusion of newcomers in rural and shrinking communities. Cross-regional partnerships can support local communities in adapting place-based strategies and accessing scientific knowledge for inclusion and participation. In this way, newcomers can support and sustain economic development and the overall quality of life. Importantly, newcomers can make a place more attractive and more welcoming for others, as their active participation in daily life and local development can help all residents to identify more strongly with the region.

Municipalities can inform newcomers about the local conditions – existing services, infrastructure, cultural activities and daily life – and help them to integrate into the community. One common challenge for rural and underserved areas is the lack of housing, and here, municipalities as independent stakeholders can search for available houses and apartments and mediate between newcomers and local property owners. Greater availability of accommodation can reduce high housing costs, i.e. a sudden increase in rents and living costs for all residents.

Policy recommendations

- Places and communities need tailored strategies to create social cohesion and engagement. There is no single

policy that can tackle all the problems in every region. Instead, prioritising the needs of each community and enabling processes for intergenerational and intercommunal dialogue are fundamental steps to increasing the quality of life for all residents.

- Local policymakers need improved access to recent information about how younger and older residents feel about the cultural activities and public services available in their regions. Surveys and participatory methods are always more effective than considering social media trends and posts.

- E-technologies can mitigate the lack of infrastructure and resources in depopulating and underserved regions, but citizens need physical structures to meet, talk in person and take collective decisions.

- Development models based on territorial competition and growth of cities can lead to uneven city-regional dynamics, generating territorial inequalities and imbalances. Boosting the territorial capital, improving the regional image and collaborative modes of action and financing can help regional actors overcome territorial disparities and enhance social cohesion.

- Newcomers can be a source of improvement to the quality of life in regions feeling "left behind" as long as the structural problems in the region are addressed properly. Newcomers will make the need for improvements to healthcare and school systems, transportation, digital infrastructure and housing more visible and vital.

Footnotes

[1] You can read about best-practice examples, areas for improvement and more detailed suggestions for local communities in the discussion paper available on our website: https://population-euro-pe.eu/research/discussion-papers/regional-population-diversity-and-social-cohesion-local-context

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