NEWCOMER INTEGRATION IN THE RURAL AREAS

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Abstract. Demographic trends in recent decades and forecasts for the coming decades indicate that a significant portion of Latvia's territories, particularly rural areas, will experience a decline in population. Therefore, attracting and retaining newcomers to these areas plays a crucial role in their sustainable development, as they contribute to the growth of the local economy and society and provide new social and cultural services to the community. However, the impact of newcomers on permanent residents is largely determined by their willingness and ability to integrate into the local society and systems. To assess the integration process of newcomers in rural Latvia, this empirical study is based on interviews with individuals who have moved to rural areas. The research reveals that the integration process is multifaceted and can occur through various channels, including workplaces, communities, homes, and organizations. Facilitating factors of integration are mechanisms that enable the formation of active communities and facilitate the successful integration of newcomers, while hindering factors arise when newcomers are dissatisfied with aspects of life that resulted directly from their move to rural areas.

Key words: newcomers; rural areas; integration.

JEL code: O18; P25; R23

Introduction

Rural areas play an important role in fostering sustainable regional development, and their significance is increasingly recognized also in the European Union and national-level planning documents. However, the sustainable development of rural areas cannot be achieved without the people who live in them; and, considering the current negative demographic trends in rural Latvia (Krisjane et al., 2017; Krumins et al., 2020; Dahs et al., 2023; Krisjane et al., 2023), newcomers play an important role in restoring the composition of the population. The arrival of newcomers in rural areas has the potential to positively influence not only the demographic and economic situation of the locality, but also to provide new social and cultural services to the local community. The knowledge, skills, and potential entrepreneurial activities of newcomers can be viewed as assets that can improve the economic climate and enrich social relations (Nugin, Kasemets, 2021; Aure et al., 2018). Therefore, the attraction and retention of newcomers has the potential to ensure the sustainable development of rural areas.

In light of the aforementioned, it is essential to investigate the phenomenon of newcomers in rural areas, the motivations behind such migration patterns and the subsequent integration processes experienced by newcomers. Since newcomers more often overestimate the aspects of staying in a certain territory, compared to local residents (Haartsen, Stockdale, 2017), it is important to evaluate those integration factors that are significant obstacles and enablers for successful integration into the rural social fabric. Despite the growing interest in rural in-migration in European level, Latvia currently lacks qualitative sociological research that explores the integration experiences of newcomers in rural areas and their motivations for relocation. Thereby **the aim of the research** is to investigate what is the integration process of newcomers in the rural areas of Latvia. The following **tasks** have been set to achieve the aim:

1) to examine theoretical perspectives on integration processes for newcomers in rural areas;
2) to analyse how successful is the integration process for newcomers in rural Latvia;

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3) to identify factors that promote and hinder the integration of newcomers in the rural area.

Within the framework of this research, those who have moved to rural areas from urban territory within the last 10 years are considered newcomers and is the **research object** of this study. In addition, areas outside the urban areas of national cities and counties are considered as rural areas within the scope of the study.

The empirical study is based on 12 face-to-face interviews with newcomers in different rural areas of Latvia, conducted in the period from September 2022 to June 2023 in Kurzeme region. The sample population for this study exclusively comprises individuals who migrated to rural areas within the last 10 years. These participants previously resided in urban environments or re-migrated from foreign countries, and the age of the interviewees ranged from 26 to 55 years. As part of the research, secondary data were also analysed – 13 interviews with newcomers to Latvian rural areas conducted in 2021 by the association "Latvijas Lauku Forums". These interviews were conducted mainly in the Vidzeme region.

Research results and discussion

1. The theoretical framework of the integration of newcomers in rural areas

Integration can be conceptualized as a dynamic process characterized by the strengthening of relationships within a social system, alongside the successful introduction and incorporation of new members and groups into the system and its associated institutions. According to Bosswick and Heckman (2006), when this process is achieved effectively, the society is considered to be well-integrated. Integration is most often seen as a two-way process of mutual adaptation between newcomers and members of the local society, including in a united society which is based on common values and a sense of belonging, at the same time everyone preserves their identity and culture (Kolcanovs, 2010).

Existing research underscores the value of categorizing newcomers to rural areas. This segmentation facilitates a deeper understanding of their motivations for relocation and, consequently, informs the development of targeted strategies to promote their successful integration into the rural areas. Haartsen and Stockdale (2017) distinguish two groups of newcomers: 1) *newcomers – convinced stayers,* who consciously adapt to integrate into the local community and remain in the designated rural area for the rest of their lives; and 2) *newcomers – children-led stayers*, who are only involved in community activities related to children and are not sure that they will stay in the area after the children have grown up. A study in the Netherlands confirmed that the main reason for moving people to the countryside is housing driven (Karsten, 2020) and therefore three groups of newcomers in rural area can be distinguished:

1) *pragmatic movers* – families belonging to this type move mainly because they see opportunities in the countryside, their desire is to maintain employment, cultural and social ties with the city, but they are looking for more comfortable and pleasant living conditions;

2) *displaces families* - the families' move to the countryside was not voluntary, it happened for financial or other reasons, they left the city with regret;

3) *happy movers* - families who consciously try to move away from the problems of cities and look for a rural idyll to break ties with the city and start a new life in the countryside.

Different types of integration are distinguished in the academic literature, e.g. cultural integration (a process that includes cognitive, cultural, behavioural, attitudinal changes on the part of newcomers and the local community), functional integration (includes economic integration in the labour market, political integration in democratic processes and integration in access to services provided to society)

(Geddes, 2001; Sabatini, Salcedo, 2007); however, the integration of newcomers in rural areas is best characterized by social integration which refers to the integration of individuals into the system, the formation of relationships between individuals and their attitude towards society (Lockwood, 1964). According to Bosswick and Heckman (2006), in order for social integration to be successful in society, four dimensions of social integration must be fulfilled:

1) structural integration;
2) cultural integration;
3) interactive integration;
4) identification integration.

The **structural dimension** of integration includes access to the systems of public institutions (e.g. the labour market, the housing market, the education system) and participation in them determines the socioeconomic status of an individual and the resources and opportunities available to him. The **cultural integration** dimension determines that there is a need to acquire communication competences, knowledge of local culture and society in order to occupy a place in society. The **interactive dimension** of integration refers to acceptance and inclusion in society's relations, social contacts while **identification integration** refers to the sense of belonging, identification with the place and local society.

Successful integration of newcomers also includes the individual's integration into the community and a sense of belonging to it. According to sense of Community theory (McMillian, Chavis, 1986), the sense of community is strengthened and the formation of bonds between individuals in society is facilitated by several factors, such as sense of belonging, influence of the group, satisfaction of individual and group desires and a shared emotional bond, which ensures positive and frequent contact between members of society.

2. Social integration dimensions of newcomers in rural Latvia

As part of the empirical study, the integration process of newcomers in rural Latvia was analyzed based on the social integration model of Bosswick and Heckman (2006).

Cultural integration is based on a two-way adaptation process, in which newcomers need to acquire communication skills, knowledge of local culture and society, while local society must be able to accept the newcomers' different cultural roots. In the context of Latvia, this study shows that when the population migrated inland, language, which is one of the foundations of cultural learning, was not an obstacle to successful integration, even for those individuals who were with foreign origin. The analysis of secondary data shows that the newcomer from Canada has not learned the Latvian language, but this is not an obstacle to socialize with local residents and identify with Latvian culture and rural area, as well as occupy a recognizable place in society. This shows that the language criterion is no longer as important as before, because the society itself has become more open and multicultural through a two-way adaptation process. However, interviewees admit that not fully understanding the language means losing a wide range of opportunities.

Cultural integration also includes learning about the traditions practiced by the local community. In general, the information obtained in the interviews about traditions and integration in this context does not reveal significant aspects that would create obstacles for newcomers to integrate into the local society. This could be explained by the fact that there are no significant differences in cultural traditions when migrating within the borders of the country. Several interviewed families admitted that, although they had previously lived in other municipalities with other cultural traditions, they gladly accepted the traditions of the local

community, such as participating in local festivals and local traditional dance and music groups. The biggest differences that seem obvious in rural areas are the culture of greeting neighbours and other community residents. Greetings when meeting in public places is simple but mandatory: "*And you greet people on the street, you don't pass them by, you don't roll your eyes and don't pretend you don't know anyone. Even if I don't, I greet them and they say hello back*". There are also situations when, without a simple greeting, it is necessary to exchange a few more words: "*It is important to sit down with the neighbour's prim works and drink a cup of coffee, talk for at least ten minutes. You don't experience such moments with your neighbour in the city*". In general, newcomers to the countryside take daily interactions, observance of local norms and the local communication style as a matter of course, without even realizing it.

Structural integration includes access to the systems of public institutions, including for the labour market, the housing market, the education system and political system. Empirical research allows to conclude that this dimension of integration clearly occurs when developing entrepreneurship in rural areas. A significant portion of the interviewees were engaged in entrepreneurial activities within rural areas, providing employment and income not only for themselves but also for other members of the local community. Newcomers are engaged in typical industries in rural areas - animal husbandry, cultivation of crops, while others continue the types of business started in the cities - providing accounting services, consulting on work safety or creating design lamps. "*Not everyone in the countryside should be engaged in agriculture. There are many different things to do in the countryside. Especially in today's digital age, you can do a lot*". New initiatives of business included a cafe offering expanded cultural opportunities, an online store, development of rural tourism experiences, and the opening of a dental office. This approach fosters not only the integration of newcomers into the rural community, but also the development of the local economy. For example, the family, which opened a dental office in the countryside with the support of state funding, has successfully developed this business, and now not only local residents of rural areas, but also residents from neighbouring and distant municipalities come for dental services.

Integration in rural area can take place through business especially successfully if it is related to opening one's homestead for tourism activity, for example, creating a guest house or glamping. "*The idea of owning a house came suddenly and was meant to stay - we want a house in the countryside, where we can finally fulfil our dream, start a catering business, create a small guest house, in the yard of which various events will be held for the pleasure of ourselves and others*". Considering the fact that newcomers are socially and economically active, they willingly get involved in local civic activities – associations and meetings, participate in municipal elections, which allows to strengthen their status in the local community and promotes attachment to the community and the place.

While rural entrepreneurs contribute positively to both the economy and society, establishing a business within these regions can be challenging due to specific characteristics of the local social environment. A family that opened a cafe admitted in interviews that part of the local community perceived their new cultural space with negative emotions, complained about the noise, and even wrote complaints about it to the municipality.

Apart from business, municipalities and rural institutions also play an important role in promoting the employment of citizens in rural areas. Individuals with higher educational attainment reported encountering minimal difficulty securing employment in rural areas with relevant qualifications. A subset of participants, after relocating to rural communities, with relative ease found positions in social service organizations and local government agencies. The interviewees also admitted that starting work in municipal institutions helped in the integration process - news about opportunities and events in the municipality was learned faster, it was easier to get to know local residents.

The present study highlights schools as a significant factor in the structural integration of young families with children in rural areas. Interviewees expressed appreciation for the proximity of schools to their residences and the smaller class sizes, which facilitate increased teacher attention to individual students. Additionally, rural schools may offer unique opportunities not readily available in urban environments. For instance, one family who relocated from Riga to a rural community noted that their child was previously denied enrolment in a music school due to high competition in the city. In contrast, the rural school offered inclusive enrolment, ensuring access for all children. "*It's better to be the first in the village than the last in the city*". Schools promote the cohesion of the local community by organizing various events for both students and their families, thus facilitating the easier integration of newcomers into the local community. At the same time, newcomers are concerned about the closure of small rural schools, which has been voiced at the political level, which can significantly undermine the availability of education for children and the demographic structure of local society in rural areas.

Successful structural integration is a precondition for **interactive integration**, which refers to acceptance and inclusion in societal relationships and social contacts. Analysing the interview data, it can be concluded that among the newcomers there has been both a very positive integration into the local society and also a quite negative one. Some newcomers have not felt any distinct obstacles, but rather an encouragement to get to know the locals and participate in community activities. Many interviewees confirmed that excellent neighbourly relations develop in the countryside and that neighbours proactively get involved in solving the problems of newcomers to help them feel accepted and supported: "*The neighbours will always help and we have a community here, it's so close and supportive", "We would be lost without our neighbours", "Nature is amazing, but our neighbours are incredible. We met so many friends!", "We have great neighbours! Its simplicity and realness - this is something that cannot be found in the big city race".* This allows to conclude that it is neighbours who play a big role in ensuring interactive integration, becoming friends over time. Neighbours are an important support in the integration process, who tell and introduce the abilities, occupations and diversity of rural areas of the surrounding people. Therefore, it is not surprising that newcomers recognize that in the countryside, in contrast to the cities, where it is not so important, it is necessary to maintain positive mutual ties with neighbours. Because the limited number of people in the countryside means that in case of bad relations, you can lose both contacts, employees and customers. It should be mentioned that the understanding of neighbours in rural areas is much broader than in cities: "*In the county, we all call each other neighbours, and there is such a sense of security that you know that there is always someone to ask for help or share joy with".*

The interviewees confirm that it is easier to get to know the people around you in the countryside. "Come to the countryside, because you will make friends much easier, people here are much closer and will always be by your side". There are many good reviews about establishing contacts with other residents, for example, "I quickly got to know each other, I communicated, it was not difficult to find a contact". At the same time, another interviewee admitted that there is no desire for community events and activities, and the countryside is also a suitable place to live for the realization of this desire: "Peace, silence. No neighbours come to meet here in the morning. Do what you want and how you want".

However, some of the interviewees in the study admitted that integrating into the local society, especially in the first years of moving, was full of challenges, as the locals were reluctant to accept newcomers. One family admitted that it was difficult for them to accept that "*Everyone knows everything about us even better than we know ourselves*". In addition, newcomers admitted that they initially felt mistrust from the local community, increased interest, which was not always favourable. Similar problems in integration among peers have also been experienced by the children of newcomers, for whom there has

been increased interest among schoolmates and therefore a luck of private space in schools. Another interviewee described a negative experience with a neighbour who was unhappy with the newcomer's dog-walking habits and complained about it all the time.
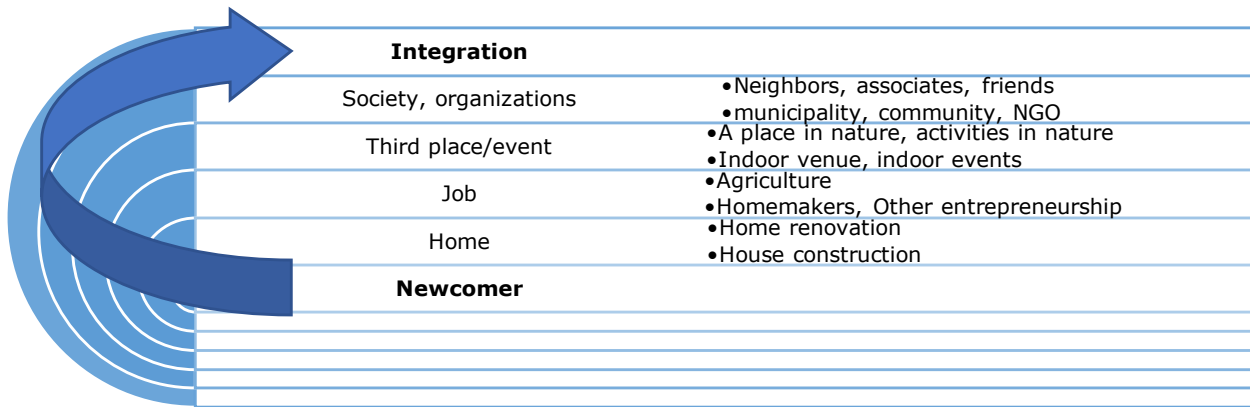
A key aspect of **identification integration** for newcomers involves the development of identification with the local population and a strong sense of belonging within the rural space. It can be reflected as caring for the surrounding environment and promoting local community activities. This study confirms that newcomers feel most strongly connected to their home, which is evidenced by the persistent work they have done to restore or make the home suitable for living. Through the stories, it can be felt a sense of satisfaction for what you have accomplished, as well as a reluctance to return to the city. "*The sun is already setting. Everything is in bushes and grass that you can't even get through. And - I realized that this is my place*". Newcomers most often get a sense of attachment to local community by getting involved in local community activities, interest groups, which allow them to get a sense of belonging and a sense of identity with the rural area.

Several interviewees revealed that they were involved in a folk-dance group, together with the locals created a regional market with local rural goods, as well as involving the region in a traditional ensemble of pipers, which allowed them to get to know the local residents better, to feel a connection with the local community and its traditions, thus promoting the formation of a sense of belonging to it.

The feeling of belonging to the community arises also in situations where conflict groups are formed - groups that arise when there are conflict situations between those groups that have authority and those that do not. In such situations, opportunities for rural integration arise, as a common feeling of "us" and "them" arises. For example, when there is a conflict between the local residents and the municipality administration: "*We all feel very underrated together. [..] In all those large populated villages, there are Easter events, there are Christmas events, there are some workshops and cook days, but we don't have nothing*". This study shows that newcomers to the rural areas have more energy to achieve their desired results and changes, not to put up with rejections, and these community battles make it easier to integrate into the rural territory, because in the process of the struggle they get to know the residents and have proven their ability to bring positive changes in the rural territory.

3. Impacting factors of the integration process in rural areas

Based on the empirical study it was concluded that the process of integration of newcomers in rural areas includes several elements that allow the newcomer to integrate into the local community and territory, such as home, work, third place and events, community and organizations of the rural territory (Figure 1). The integration process takes place gradually, through the first stage, which is usually the home to which the newcomers have moved. Integration can happen through all of these elements, but one of them can also be omitted.

Source: authors' construction based on analysis of the interviews

Fig. 1. **Integration process of newcomers in rural Latvia**

The conducted interviews also made it possible to determine the factors that contributed to the integration of newcomers in the countryside, or, on the contrary, hindered it. Among the factors that contributed to the integration of newcomers in the rural areas (Table 1) are those that the interviewees recognized as creating a positive sense of belonging and patriotic feelings and the desire to highlight their rural territory as special.

Table 1

Facilitating factors of the integration process in rural Latvia

Home	Job	Third place/ events	Society/ organizations
- creating a home story - getting to know others through house clean-up event - garden landscaping - getting to know the locals through the home renovation process - opening home to others - a creative house with workshops, an open country homestead - organizing events at home - open solstice celebration, cafe days, festivals	- carpentry - consulting for locals such as accounting, job safety - guest house - glamping - animal husbandry - beekeeping - making lamps - painting - handicrafts - pottery making - outing catering	- houses of culture - library - house cafe events - mother-child courses - amateur theatre - choir - folk dances - lake and other recreation areas	- initiatives to improve the environment - active associations - national guard - hunting - NGO activities - supportive friends, associates, neighbours

Source: authors' construction based on analysis of the interviews

In particular, the factors hindering integration summarized in Table 2 were aspects that caused the interviewees dissatisfaction with the current situation in the countryside or made them consider the idea of moving back to the city.

Table 2

The factors hindering integration of newcomers in rural area

Cultural integration	Structural integration	Interactive integration	Identification integration
	housing shortage	absence of peers in the territory	
	labour shortage	reluctance of local society to accept newcomers	
	possible rural school closure	lack of information about the possibilities at the first stage of migration	
	lack of a reliable workforce	absence of mentor networks	
	foreign big landlords in the neighbourhood	family reluctance to get involved	
	difficulties in attracting financial resources	lack of third places	
	unorganized infrastructure	lack of events	
seclusion of municipalities administrations			

Source: authors' construction based on analysis of the interviews

Factors related to the development of business in rural areas, such as the lack of qualified labour, can be considered as one of the factors hindering integration. "*There is a lack of stable employees, there is nothing to rely on. During the season, it is difficult to find people who will conscientiously do the work, come to work on time*". Also, often newcomers have limited access to resources to develop their business, for example, agricultural land, as a large part of the resources have been taken by the big business owners. "*Farmers who grow cereals, they catch every piece of land nearby. They are up for grabs. There will definitely be outbidding and at market value we could hardly get next to each other. More should be promised there*".

But newcomers also mention the lack of housing and the difficulty of attracting financial resources for their construction as an inhibiting factor for rural development. The interviewees revealed that when a vacant property appears in the nearby area, there is immediate interest in it, even regardless of the technical condition of the housing.

When newcomers are asked about the disadvantages of rural areas, they often mention the disorganized infrastructure - mainly the roads in rural areas, as well as the quality of the Internet. Disorganized roads create problems for newcomers in terms of convenient traffic with the surrounding areas, both for domestic purposes and for business development.

Conclusions, proposals, recommendations

1)   Integration is a broad concept, but social integration, which has four main dimensions (cultural, structural, interactive and identification) is best able to explain the integration of newcomers and the integration process, both through relations with the society living in rural areas, the physical environment, and other systems involved.

2)   The integration process of newcomers depends on the openness of the rural community. Although a large number of newcomers to rural Latvia have felt accepted and supported by the local society, for some the integration process has been full of challenges due to the non-accepting attitude of the local society.

3)   The integration process in rural Latvia takes place through several elements – firstly by home, following work, third places and events, as well as society and various organizations. The integration

process takes place gradually, through the first stage, which is usually the home to which the newcomers have moved. Integration can happen through all of these elements, but one of them can also be omitted.

4)   While there are many factors that contributed to the integration of newcomers in the rural areas, which are related with development of home in the rural area, different job opportunities, activities outside home and local community, there are also factors that can negatively affect newcomers' future intentions to stay in the rural area. Among them are such factors as housing shortage, lack of resources for business development, reluctance of local society to accept newcomers, concerns about school closures and unorganized infrastructure.

Acknowledgement

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