

Spaces of Belonging: Community Engagement and Social Inclusion in Rural Communities

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the crucial role of public spaces and the nonprofit sector in fostering social inclusion within rural communities facing increasing centralization. Challenging purely economic development models, it argues for a holistic understanding of regional wellbeing centred on community engagement in “third places.” By examining the dynamics of space use and the potential for social isolation, the article highlights the importance of human-scale design and strategic revitalization of community-centred spaces to enhance social capital, quality of life, and resilience in smaller urban contexts. It calls for further research into the lived experiences and wellbeing of residents in these areas, advocating for a shift beyond purely economic indicators of local development.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article explore le rôle crucial des espaces publics et du secteur à but non lucratif dans la promotion de l'inclusion sociale au sein de communautés rurales confrontées à une centralisation croissante. Tout en remettant en cause les modèles de développement purement économiques, il plaide pour une compréhension holistique d'un bien-être régional centré sur l'engagement communautaire dans les « tiers-lieux ». En examinant la dynamique de l'utilisation de l'espace et le potentiel d'isolement social, l'article souligne l'importance d'une conception à échelle humaine et d'une revitalisation stratégique des espaces centrés sur la communauté pour améliorer le capital social, la qualité de vie et la résilience dans des contextes urbains plus restreints. Il appelle en outre à des recherches plus approfondies sur les expériences et le bien-être des habitants de ces zones, en plaidant pour un changement au-delà des indicateurs purement économiques du développement local.

Keywords / Mots clés : third places, regional development, community engagement, social inclusion / tiers-lieux, développement régional, engagement communautaire, inclusion sociale

INTRODUCTION

Although urban studies often highlight the link between physical space and social cohesion, the dynamics within smaller communities remain somewhat understudied. In the context of increasing centralization, smaller communities face greater risks of social and economic exclusion, which limit their access to opportunities and participation in social life. This article argues for a holistic understanding of regional wellbeing that places the contribution of nonprofit and social economy at its core. We suggest that the nonprofit and social economy sectors are critical in shaping the quality of life. Specifically, we explore the extent to which local populations receive opportunities for meaningful engagement in public spaces, assuming that such interactions manifest community and citizen engagement. Although from an economic geography perspective, Calignano, Nilsen, Jørgensen Nordli, and Hauge (2024) have highlighted how different territorial areas, even in the case of relatively small and seemingly socially and economically homogeneous countries, are different. This is embedded in a new strand of geographical studies that considers local development as a contested issue where change, reproductive, and denied agencies compete to find their own immaterial and tangible spaces (Calignano & Nilsen, 2024; Hauge, Nilsen, & Calignano, 2025), while negotiating their participation and inclusion in public and community life with the aim of triggering processes of transformation (Calignano & Siena, 2025). All the mechanisms illustrated above go beyond mere economic approaches to the study of local development but must necessarily embrace and integrate a clear perspective that looks more deeply at the nonprofit sector and the social economy.

While the concept of quality of life encompasses multiple possible indicators and can be applied to different places, we intend to focus on smaller areas, with particular attention to groups experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability.

Even Eurostat (2024), a department of the European Commission and the official statistical office of the European Union, recognizes the difficulties in using gross domestic product (GDP) as a measure of quality of life. Although GDP is a useful tool for measuring the financial value of market production, it says nothing about how wealth is distributed in a given population.

DISCUSSION

In recent decades, we have seen a trend toward centralization, creating a dynamic in which large urban centres thrive, while smaller cities and rural areas face increasing challenges. One consequence of this development is that competition for space is significantly intense in larger urban centres, driven by high demand for both residential and commercial real estate. This phenomenon is often fuelled by capital investment, leading to a struggle for space characterized by significant financial and social pressures. In contrast, smaller cities experience a different dynamic in terms of space use. Competition for space is less intense, making these areas more susceptible to developer interests. With potentially fewer stakeholders and lower land values, developers may find it easier to capture and shape the urban environment according to their interests. The relative ease with which developers can influence the physical structure of smaller cities highlights the importance of regulatory frameworks and community involvement in urban planning to ensure balanced and inclusive development. This puts enormous pressure on local policymakers. On the one hand, they are under pressure to accommodate and strengthen investment in their city's development; on the

other hand, the pursuit of profit maximization may clash with the public interest, for example, in the preservation of historic sites, green spaces, and especially so-called “third spaces.”

The concept of “third places,” as formulated by Oldenburg (1999), envisages social environments distinct from the domestic and working spheres, which serve as crucial places for informal public encounters and community building. Third places “host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work” (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 16). In the context of small towns, these spaces assume a particularly relevant role, acting as crucial nodes for social interaction and the promotion of community cohesion. Given the characteristics of smaller urban centres, often characterized by dense social networks, third places facilitate the overcoming of social divisions and promote a deep sense of belonging.

The contribution of nonprofit organizations and the social economy is crucial to making and/or maintaining small towns and rural areas attractive. In addition to purely economic factors, which can be monetized, other aspects of perceived quality of life also come into play. Jan Gehl's human-scale approach seems to fit both smaller rural contexts and large cities. In his 1971 classic, *Livet mellem husene: udeaktiviteter og udemiljøer* [Life Between Buildings: Using Public Space], he argues that people can enjoy a better quality of life when they spend their time in human-scale buildings and carefully designed urban environments (Gehl, 2011). In other words, when buildings and environments are designed to fit the human scale and human perception, people tend to spend more time between buildings, i.e., in public or semi-private spaces.

This shows that the nonprofit and social economy sectors are not simply complementary to the formal economy; they are instrumental in profoundly shaping quality of life. These sectors foster social cohesion, promote civic engagement, and address critical social needs that market-driven solutions often overlook (Klinenberg, 2018). By providing essential services, creating inclusive spaces, and empowering marginalized populations, they improve the overall wellbeing of a region. This is often not considered a priority in the development of smaller areas, where investment is rare.

Studies examine how the creation or revitalization of key third places can counteract the potential for social isolation, often exacerbated by limited resources or infrastructure issues in smaller urban areas. By emphasizing human interaction and inclusiveness, this integrated approach highlights the importance of designing urban spaces that strengthen social capital and contribute to the overall wellbeing of residents of smaller cities. An interesting argument is that life between buildings has the potential to create a self-reinforcing process; when someone starts using a space—in this context, a public space—more and more people are attracted to it, and more activities are created. There is, of course, a negative version of this phenomenon: when fewer and fewer people use those spaces. The dangers of public space collapse and the possible negative consequences are also described by Jane Jacobs (c.f. Jacobs, 1961).

Third places are central to the social fabric of these communities because they contribute substantially to the formation of social capital, a key factor in community wellbeing and resilience (Latham & Layton, 2019). Accessibility, inclusiveness, and intentional design are key to ensuring that these spaces effectively serve the entire community.

In the context of smaller cities, the synergistic application of Ray Oldenburg's (1999) third-place theory and Jan Gehl's (2011) human-centred urban planning principles offers a compelling approach to promoting social vitality. Gehl's emphasis on pedestrian-oriented design directly supports the creation of Oldenburg's third places: informal community centres are vital to community cohesion. However, creating such dynamic environments requires urban planners to strategically consider social and nonprofit activities, recognising their symbiotic relationship with commercial interests. This integrated approach recognizes the interdependent contributions of both sectors to the overall vitality and functionality of urban spaces. Reconciling private property rights with the need to protect shared cultural and environmental resources is an ongoing challenge.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, although small cities face unique challenges in maintaining viable third places due to economic and demographic vulnerabilities, strategic revitalization and the development of community-centred spaces, in synergy with nonprofit involvement, hold significant potential to improve social inclusion and quality of life. This calls for a deeper analysis of the interaction between social, environmental, and economic dimensions within the built environment, particularly to understand how human-scale design, inspired by principles such as those of Jan Gehl (1971), can promote social interaction in these vulnerable contexts. Going beyond purely economic indicators of quality of life, further research is essential to investigate the mechanisms through which engaged local communities and carefully designed public spaces, both internal and external, can contribute to the resilience and wellbeing of smaller cities.

Therefore, in addition to reflecting on small cities from a policy perspective, this article indirectly aims to call for further research that addresses how people live and how happy they are in the places where they live. While there is a large body of geographical research focused on small cities (Hauge, Calignano, Bern, & Lønningdal, 2023; Mayer & Lazzeroni, 2022), future studies addressing the issues we have briefly touched on in this short article seem more necessary than ever. Single case studies or, even better, a comparative perspective (e.g., Nordic countries vs. Central Europe vs. Northern Europe) could help provide more relevant, in-depth, and credible results than often purely economic approaches to studying local development. Shedding light on how people experience and appreciate places, as well as how much they earn and what they produce, could lead to surprising results that challenge what our eyes and ears—accustomed to certain stories repeated in a myriad of similar ways—tend to see and believe.

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