

## Article

# Winding Pathways to Rural Regeneration: Exploring Challenges and Success Factors for Three Types of Rural Changemakers in the Context of Knowledge Transfer and Networks

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**Abstract:** The regeneration of rural areas is a multifaceted process driven by a variety of actors operating in diverse contexts. Understanding specific barriers faced by these actors—as well as factors that contribute to the success of their initiatives—therefore seems to be a prerequisite for designing policies that can effectively support rural changemakers and thus promote rural regeneration. The goal of this exploratory paper is to identify key challenges and success factors for three types of rural changemakers—rural newcomers, new entrants into farming, and farming successors—based on empirical data gathered in three case studies conducted as part of the Horizon2020 project “RURALIZATION” in Poland in 2021. The results of the study show that one of the most important determinants of the success of rural changemakers’ activities is having adequate formal and informal knowledge. This is important in the context of knowledge transfer, interacting with and functioning in the local environment, and consequently laying the foundations for rural regeneration. Rural regeneration must be treated as a complex and long-term process that is strongly linked to the activation of knowledge transfer mechanisms.

**Keywords:** rural regeneration; rural changemakers; knowledge; local communities



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## 1. Introduction

Today, rural areas are facing challenges related to the shift of society from the era of agriculture to the industrial era to a knowledge economy [1]. Therefore, in terms of rural decline it is necessary to take a new perspective on the problem of rural development and to implement regeneration. The regeneration of rural areas is a multifaceted process driven by a variety of actors operating in diverse contexts. Understanding specific barriers faced by these actors—as well as factors that contribute to the success of their initiatives—therefore seems to be a prerequisite for designing policies that can effectively support rural changemakers and consequently promote rural regeneration. The ongoing processes of rural development are strongly connected to the increasing importance of knowledge and its creation and rapid transfer. Knowledge is the driving force in regional and local development [2]. The increasing importance of knowledge poses a challenge for rural areas, as their access to knowledge is objectively less than that of cities [3]. However, at the same time, this creates an opportunity for rural areas, as it enables the introduction of new, more effective ways of conducting economic activity and managing rural communities [4]. Knowledge and its creation and transfer are particularly important in the context of rural regeneration and are key aspects in any consideration related to it.

While regeneration is applicable to rural areas as a whole, in actuality, rural regeneration tends to occur in specific locales. Therefore, the subject of interest should be local communities and the processes shaping them, including the conditions and the specifics of the functioning of the so-called rural changemakers, which can include rural newcomers,

new entrants into farming, and farming successors. From the perspective of local communities, it is important that both newcomers and those who have decided to take up farming or other economic activities “fit in”. Regardless of the chosen way of functioning in the rural community, all activity requires access to knowledge, skills, peer networks, and personal competences, that is, resources that are less “tangible” than traditional resources needed for rural activities (e.g., land, machinery, capital) [5]. It should be noted that people who have decided to live in rural areas and take up farming (new entrants) or other activities (newcomers) are recognized as agents who contribute to generational renewal and who bring innovation to rural areas with all the associated benefits for local development [6]. Therefore, exploring how such people function in different contexts is crucial to understanding the processes taking place in rural areas today. In particular, it is important to recognize how factors such as knowledge, skills, and human and social capital are relevant in the context of supporting these initiatives. The broader the knowledge base of new entrants into farming and newcomers, the greater the business opportunities and the possibility of identifying opportunities [7]. Knowledge transfer and the utilization of new knowledge are therefore crucial in the process of establishing a successful rural business [8,9]. Of course, the strictly local dimension itself, related to individuals or households, is significantly influenced by policies implemented at the regional and national levels. The process of rural regeneration can be successful based on the conditions created, the solutions adopted, and the support available.

The purpose of this study is to identify key challenges and success factors for three types of rural changemakers—rural newcomers, new entrants into farming, and farming successors—based on empirical data gathered in three case studies conducted as part of the Horizon2020 project “RURALIZATION” in Poland in 2021. The analysis focused mainly on the role of knowledge (transfer) and connections between members of rural communities, with particular attention paid to their role in creating synergies and cooperation networks of local and regional actors. This analysis was conducted from the perspective of the need to carry out activities to provide rural areas with a basis for development and overcoming rural decline. In this context, the European Union document titled “A long-term Vision for the EU’s Rural Areas—Towards Stronger, Connected, Resilient and Prosperous Rural Areas by 2040” [10] indicates the main drivers shaping the future of rural areas include empowered communities, social innovation, diversification of economic activities, and social resilience. With intensive processes of influx of new rural residents and their integration into the social fabric related to knowledge transfer and mutual learning, these drivers can be used to create stronger and more resilient rural areas. However, their effective use requires a thorough recognition of socio-economic conditions, in various contexts and at different spatial scales.

## 2. Rural Regeneration in the Context of Knowledge

The current trends affecting rural areas pose significant challenges. Bourgeois [11] discusses several major trends affecting the transformation of rural areas, such as globalization (risk of losing sight of the importance of peripheral rural areas), connectivity (benefits and costs associated with developing global digital communication), technological development (conditioned by the capacity to adapt new technologies), population growth, limited resources, and urbanization. According to Woods [12], the main challenges shaping the trajectory of the development of rural space and society include protecting biodiversity, securing an energy supply, and irregular migration. Similarly, in pointing out the most important megatrends affecting the rural economy, Kuhmonen and Kuhmonen [13] pay particular attention to environmental, food, energy, and technological issues. At the same time, they underline the competences and capacities of rural communities regarding change. The trends presented should be considered in relation to the social and economic changes that have been observed to affect rural areas for many years, such as the decline in agricultural employment, the growth of service-based economies in cities, and the consequent exodus of working-age people from the countryside, particularly young people

(e.g., [14–16]). Collectively, we can refer to these phenomena as “rural decline”. Therefore, taking into account the observed trends and the phenomenon of rural decline, it seems necessary to take measures for rural regeneration. Osborne et al. [17] (p. 158) define rural regeneration as “programs and policies intended to lead to the social, economic and/or community development or rejuvenation of a local area.” In the case of rural regeneration, one should therefore keep in mind the local context while taking into account wider rural policy [18]. This implies that all measures to improve the functioning of rural areas must consider the local context, must be adapted to the specificity of the place [19,20], and must be distinguished by an understanding of the diversity of rural areas [21]. In doing so, it should be noted that the definition of what is rurality and/or rural areas is the subject of ongoing scientific discussions and also reflects changes emerging in society and the economy. Indeed, both urban and rural are multidimensional concepts. Hence, Woods [22] notes that the term rural refers to a loose set of ideas and associations that are developed in check, discussed, and contested. Of course, there are several converging characteristics, albeit, not universal or applicable to every context, of rural areas, i.e., the relative abundance of land, significant distances between rural settlements and between these settlements and the cities [23], and sparse settlement. Formally, for practical reasons for the purpose of analysis, the distinction between urban and rural areas is adopted on an administrative basis. It is worth noting that in rural studies, in recent years, the approach to how we define rurality, and consequently how rural areas can be defined, has been changing. As Cloke [24] notes, we have moved from a functional perspective through a political-economic one to a perspective in which rurality is understood as socially constructed, meaning that we refer to a certain set of social, cultural and moral values related to rurality, rural spaces and rural life.

However, one cannot overlook the fact that rural areas, regardless of the observed changes (including deagrarianization), are still closely connected with agriculture. Hence, rural regeneration is also about improving the quality of agriculture (from the technical and social side or using “new knowledge” and implementing innovations in the broad sense). Thus, both in the broader context of rural regeneration and in the narrower one, that is, in relation to individual elements that make up rural areas (agriculture, the social sphere, environmental management, etc.), knowledge and knowledge transfer play a very important role [25,26].

When considering the importance of knowledge in rural regeneration processes, one should first refer to its characteristics. Knowledge is not homogeneous. In his seminal work, Polanyi [27] classified knowledge into two types—codified (i.e., formal or explicit) and tacit (uncodified knowledge). Codified knowledge may be in a relatively loose way transformed into symbols, and that is why it is usually easily transmitted (and oftentimes at no cost). Tacit knowledge is not explicit. The transfer of tacit knowledge is strictly dependent on social context because its sources are direct contact, cooperation, and social proximity. The transfer of this kind of knowledge (particularly through direct interaction) is sensitive to the social context [28]. Explicit and tacit knowledge ought not be separated because they are intimately associated, mutually conditioning their appearance, creation, and transfer.

The creation, sharing, and absorption of knowledge are closely related to space. The spatial dimension of knowledge is particularly important when we begin to consider its importance in connection with development processes, particularly on a local scale. Nonaka and Toyama [29] point out that knowledge requires a physical context in order to emerge. A specific area (space) providing necessary interactions (sharing time and space) allows for sharing of the context. Uncodified knowledge links up closely with place, arises out of the context and the specific features of an area, and derives from various sources, including the learning, tradition, culture, and economy present in a given area [30–32]. Tacit knowledge is perceived to be of key importance in the processes by which new knowledge is created, with its transfer taking place via socialization, and hence the importance of proximity or closeness in this context. Tacit knowledge may be passed on where there is a jointly occurring social context, for example, involving shared values, language, or culture [33],

with this clearly relating to the specifics of the passing on (or coding/decoding) of that information. Usually, a common context is possible, specifically because there is physical closeness, a dense social network, mobility of human capital, culture, and organizational efficiency [34–36]. From this follows one of the key features of rural areas in the context of knowledge creation, as lower interaction density (associated with lower population density) means, in a quantitative sense, less potential for the creation of new knowledge. This is important because access to networks (connections between people, institutions) that enable knowledge exchange is a key aspect of enabling its effective transfer [37]. In the case of rural areas, another significant limitation in access to information and knowledge is the distance to their sources, which is mainly in cities. It not only concerns a physical (spatial) distance but also a distance felt in terms of time, needs, comfort, access to people, and costs [38,39]. This problem applies to all available resources for rural regeneration [21] and is important insofar as it condemns some rural areas to a low starting “base”, which can be a significant constraint. Hence, it is necessary to see the opportunities for post-regeneration activities in the analyzed area in the processes that cause an influx of resources (including knowledge) into these areas, which can be provided by newcomers, new entrants into farming, and successors, among others.

It should be noted that migration processes are largely responsible for development processes and related knowledge transfer. Migration is a factor shaping the development potential of particular areas, as the migration of people means the migration of knowledge [40–42]. However, in this case, it should be taken into account that the influx of new residents into rural areas does not mean an easy transfer of knowledge from them to traditional locals and vice versa. This is due to the peculiarities of knowledge transfer, such as social and cultural constraints. In the case of tacit knowledge transfer, the role of norms, daily practices, and culture is important [43]. A particularly important issue in the transfer of this knowledge is the relationship and interaction between migrants, as they usually have different lifestyles and cultural capital. This may affect the interpersonal contacts that are the basis for transferring tacit knowledge [44]. Naldi et al. [45] emphasize that in the rural context of knowledge creation, knowledge gained in a more informal way through practice and experience is very important. Moreover, it is the codified knowledge that is the most mobile, which does not mean that it is always easy to adopt in a new area because, as Meusbürger [46] claims, understanding is the key to true mobility. Tacit knowledge also moves with and among migrants [47]. In this case, it is possible to use such knowledge when it is applied and understood in a new environment in a new context.

It should be noted that the processes associated with the influx of new residents to the countryside change in terms of activity and that successors’ activities have clear links to the creation of knowledge, networks of connections, and references to the local context. The effectiveness of local communities in overcoming development challenges relies on the presence of links and interactions between local actors, both newcomers and those representing communities of “traditional” locals. This conditions the flow of knowledge, interaction, and synergy in economic activities, as well as social “fitting in”. These are important conditions in the process of the regeneration of rural areas, which, by definition, refers to corrective measures taken to address declining economies [48]. Hence, it is important to identify the challenges and barriers facing rural changemakers, as this forms the basis for identifying opportunities to support them in the broader context of rural regeneration. Successful change in rural regeneration processes requires broad public policies implemented at all levels of administrative divisions. One of the most important roles in this context is played by the CAP (Common Agriculture Policy), which is one of the most important policies of the EU, and its importance goes beyond agriculture, as it also targets rural development. However, as studies indicate, the CAP has so far been unable to reduce existing inequities and territorial divergence among rural regions within the EU [49].

With regard to the purpose of the study and the state of knowledge, a research hypothesis was formulated that rural regeneration implemented by new entrants, newcomers, and successors in the Polish context is based on knowledge taking into account local conditions.

### 3. Methods

The methodology of this study was developed according to the framework of the Horizon 2020 project “RURALIZATION—The Opening of Rural Areas to Renew Rural Generations, Jobs and Farms” (Grant Agreement No. 817642) and is based on the RURALIZATION assessment framework method [50]. The main method employed in this article is the case study method with the purpose of gathering data on newcomers, new entrants into farming, and successors functioning in rural areas of Poland. Desk research was also conducted to characterize the analyzed case studies, the general situation in Poland with regard to these categories of rural changemakers, and knowledge transfer in the context of rural regeneration.

The case study approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth and multi-faceted analysis of specific cases (organizations, activities, etc.) and thus the identification and analysis of factors affecting the operation of practices (including their inception, development, and problems). In order to enable a comparative analysis, a common methodology was adopted in the study of case studies [51]. This made it possible to identify general regularities in the possibility of developing new practices in rural areas and thus rural regeneration through knowledge transfer.

In the case of Poland, three case studies were chosen based on desk research as examples of characteristic practices (including non-tangible aspects such as knowledge, skills, and networks). The selection of these case studies was based on the qualitative assessment of their potential and development to date based on the observations of the authors. In other words, we selected characteristic examples of new entrants, newcomers, and successors, as these were expected to provide the best insight into the identification of phenomena connected with the possibility of rural regeneration in Poland at the local scale. This selection was based on the indications of organizations active in rural regeneration in Poland. The selection of entities for the study was non-random, purposive, and resulted from the assumptions of the study. Attention was paid to the possibility of recognizing issues related to how the issue of obtaining and using knowledge is shaped in the relationship between changemakers and traditional locals.

For each of the three case studies, 10 in-depth interviews were conducted with the organizers of each practice, visitors/clients, local authorities, residents, and representatives of cooperating practices. The interviewees were selected on the assumption of equal representation of each of the above groups in the examination of each case study. The selection also had a non-random, purposive character and was based on the nature and scope of the activities of the three case studies under examination. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or online due to COVID-19 pandemic limitations. A semi-structured interview questionnaire was based on a common interview guide prepared as part of the RURALIZATION project [52] and covered four elements—identification of the respondents, origin of the practice investigated, description of the practice, and its effects and limitations. The case studies were carried out from summer 2020 to summer 2021. A desk analysis of secondary data (grey literature, online evidence, policy documents related to the case study, publications, and basic statistical data) was carried out to select the best case studies, to describe the case studies, and to characterize the nature of the issues studied in this article in the context of Poland. At the same time, it should be noted that Poland is a good example for this type of research because rural decline [53,54] is particularly pronounced due to, among other things, the large outflow of people from rural areas, the continued importance of agriculture, and the high number of people working in agriculture. Given the large scale of change in the Polish countryside in terms of agricultural structure [55] and social issues [56], the need for rural regeneration is particularly important. Also considering the relatively short period of operation of empowered local communities in the



Polish countryside, Poland provides a good example for examining the mechanisms of the analyzed process.

In the article, newcomers to rural areas are defined as people who choose to live and work in a rural area. A new entrant to farming is defined as “a person that starts a professional existence in farming or that is integrated into an existing farm”. New entrants also mean those who are “seeking to start a farm business independent from family succession, as it occurs when we talk about ‘successors’”. Successors are individuals to whom the farm business has already been transferred or to whom it is intended to be transferred as a life-time gift or through inheritance, which may include buying out siblings [57].

#### 4. Research Results

##### 4.1. National Context

Considering the role of newcomers, new entrants into farming, and successors in counteracting rural decline, it is worth noting the general conditions occurring in Poland in relation to the age, gender, and education structure in rural areas, as well as agricultural issues. Of course, one should keep in mind the strong spatial differentiation of Polish rural areas, including the structure of the settlement system, population density, and the level of social and economic development [58], which have a significant impact on deagrarianization, one of the main drivers of rural decline.

In Poland, 40.2% of the population lives in rural areas (according to the 2021 census). The age structure of Poland’s population shows very strong inequalities, which are the result of two processes—demographic waves (alternating demographic highs and lows) and a continuous decline in the number of births [59]. Rural areas in Poland are following a demographic development path similar to most rural areas in Western Europe. Those adjacent to cities, especially large ones, continue to have a positive migration balance due to the influx of urban population, with suburban zones developing as a result. Most of the people migrating to the rural parts of suburban areas are young people, and their procreative decisions are rejuvenating these areas. However, in other rural areas the demographic situation is unfavorable.

Educational infrastructure and related social, information and communications technology, and cultural infrastructures in rural areas are underfunded and not adapted to local needs [60]. Paying attention to the key phenomenon of education in the context of the purpose of the study, it should be stated that although the general level of education of the inhabitants of rural areas is growing, it is still significantly lower than in urban areas. In Poland, 23.1% of people aged 13 and above had a university degree in 2021, with urban residents accounting for 27.4% and rural residents accounting for 16.6%. Polish farmers are characterized by a low level of education compared to other professional groups. In 2020, 59.6% of managers of an agricultural holding (in fact owners of farms) had any formal rural education (including vocational training). Most Polish farmers are male (65% of managers of private farms). In this context, it is worth noting that the general problem is an imbalanced gender structure because, while the feminization ratio in Poland is 107 women to every 100 men, among the urban population, the feminization ratio is 111, and in rural areas, it is 100.

Among female farm users, the share of those aged 44 and over is 68.2% (26.5% aged 45–54, 23.9% aged 55–64, and 17.8% aged 65 and over). For men, the percentage is 66.3% (27.0% aged 45–54, 27.4% aged 55–64, and 11.8% aged 65 and over). Compared to men, women run smaller farms. Of a total of 404,500 farms where the working user is a woman, nearly 265,500 (65.6%) occupy up to 5 hectares of agricultural land. Of the 887.8 thousand farms used by men, 406.4 thousand (45.8%) occupy up to 5 hectares of agricultural land [61].

Polish agriculture is continuing to transform, and the changes taking place should be viewed not only from a structural transformation point of view but also increasingly in relation to institutions and knowledge transfer [55]. The still existing barriers to education significantly weaken the innovation potential of rural areas and hinder the transfer of knowledge. Hence, in the process of the regeneration of these areas, the role of newcomers,

new entrants, and successors seems very important. It can even be argued that their importance in knowledge transfer in rural areas could potentially play a decisive role. Newcomers, new entrants, and successors can have a particularly important role in building local resources.

#### 4.2. Rural Newcomers

As a consequence of the intensive suburbanization taking place in Poland since the early 1990s, the Polish scientific literature on rural newcomers often distinguishes between two distinct types of newcomers—new residents of villages located in functional urban areas and new residents of more remote rural areas. The pace and specificity of suburbanization has contributed to the development of research on this process, including the dynamics of (new) communal life in suburban areas. It is obvious that newcomers to suburban areas are a specific group, as they usually retain strong ties to their previous place of residence, which is usually the city of the functional urban area. They often work in that city; take advantage of its cultural, recreational, and gastronomic offerings; and drive their children to school or kindergarten there. As the main motivation for moving out of the city is the availability of cheaper and more comfortable housing, new residents of suburban zones generally do not become involved in local community life [62].

In the case of rural areas farther from cities, most activities are carried out in the new place of residence, and because of the different reasons for moving to such areas, newcomers from more remote areas have a different approach to the local community. Wrona [63] distinguishes this type of newcomer based on their approach to the local culture; unlike suburbanites, these newcomers tend to place more importance on the local cultural context and are more likely to try to integrate into the community. Often, newcomers have “alternative” backgrounds, have a back-to-the-land nature, engage in artistic and social activities, promote local heritage, etc. In doing so, they are guided by the values they associate with rural life. However, as Laskowska-Otwinowska [64] notes, these associations tend to be based on an idealistic vision of the countryside that does not reflect the reality of rural communities and the needs of other residents who would rather develop certain practical skills than participate in an artistic performance. In addition, the lifestyle of newcomers often creates resentment among more conservative villagers. Furthermore, even if the newcomers are accepted, they can never become prominent figures in the community because in the view of many villagers, such people must also be “practical”, that is, run a farm, and newcomers rarely make farming their priority. Sometimes, newcomers are able to overcome these barriers and successfully blend into a community. Most of the time, however, there is some mismatch between the two groups, so that they live close to each other but to some extent in parallel worlds. Some authors call such mixed communities “multicultural” [63,65] and conclude that the mismatch does not mean a lack of benefit for both “cultures”, as they exchange values and inspire each other in many ways.

One characteristic and promising case of newcomers is the “Artystyka” agritourism farm located in a mountainous area in southwestern Poland. The farm is run by a pair of artists from Wrocław (regional capital city) who bought the farm and renovated the building where they now live. The main theme of the farm is art, and the owners involve the local community in their artistic activities. As they said, “We knew that this place was supposed to be creative and unite people.” (Interview 1). Because the farm is run as a business, even if a very embedded and responsible one, the model has some limitations. Thus far, the main source of income for this farm seems to be workshops for relatively wealthy people (mostly from cities). This has advantages, as it results in an influx of money, which the owners spend locally. In addition, the whole business places great emphasis on environmental education, regeneration of the local environment, and preservation of local heritage (as evidenced by the renovation of the traditional farm). This shows that while this model has limitations, it can be considered a promising practice. However, the earlier comments about tension between such newcomers and villagers are still relevant in this case.

The Artystyka model—a private business that seeks to benefit the local community—is probably most popular among Polish newcomers whose main source of income is not agriculture. Artystyka’s role in creating synergies and networks can be considered from a local and supra-local perspective. In terms of local networks, Artystyka plays a significant role in the social and cultural life of the area, contributing to the creation of local networks and thus the flow of knowledge. The organization of workshops, performances, exhibitions at local museums, and community activities (such as a clothing exchange and a forest kindergarten) are examples of activities that have helped in developing local networks and identities. Interviewees from the region mentioned that Artystyka—a model that originated outside of “localness”—helped them establish new local relationships. Artystyka is also an important node in the process of creating supra-local networks, in part because of its “double life”; the hosts continued to maintain relationships with their former place of residence while developing new relationships. This process enabled the creation of various regional networks of people who either visit the Artists’ Association, take part in the workshops, or collaborate with the hosts. Examples include members of the Artystyka Association who began working with local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), artists from the regional capital who organized art events, and visitors who decided to live in the region after visiting Artystyka. At one point, Artystyka even served as a film set for a Polish film.

Regarding policies and institutional support, the first entities the Artystyka organizers contacted upon arrival were the local library, the Snieznik Local Development Fund, two museums operating in the region, and municipality officials. Simultaneously, the organizers set up the Artystyka Association, which played a key role in applying for local development grants provided by national and international bodies. The main barrier was applying for EU funds granted by regional and national agencies (due to, among other things, the low success rate and the impossibility of receiving support to develop an agritourism farm while officially being both an artist and a farmer).

The case of Artystyka is an example of how a practice driven by personal motivations can be successfully embedded in a local context and thus yield numerous benefits for local development. The main success factor seems to be the ability to combine genuine respect for the local context with a willingness to introduce new perspectives and knowledge that improve community life. In addition, elements such as cooperation with local actors, the relative openness of local authorities, persistence in action, and having the competencies needed to obtain funding from external sources (or access to these competencies) are important. At the same time, the issue of access to land was crucial to establish Artystyka. Without initial financial capital, there would be no possibility of moving into the area. It seems that all these factors are generally reproducible, except the human factor (i.e., personality traits), which is largely beyond the influence of any policies or authorities. Other factors, however, are to a larger or lesser extent replicable, and their use, combined with the reduction of barriers, can set an example for newcomers wanting to operate an agritourism farm of how to approach the issue of embedding in the local community with social, environmental, and economic benefits.

#### *4.3. New Entrants into Farming*

In terms of new entrants into farming in Poland, there are several main categories. One category is individual farmers who, after entering agriculture (very often as successors), take various measures to improve their prospects as farmers. Young farmers of this type surveyed by Kałuża and Ginter [66] have introduced innovations, and the vast majority had EU financial support, used the services of Agricultural Advisory Centers, participated in external courses, and used the Internet and other media (20% used professional literature) as sources of knowledge relating to innovative agricultural practices. Personal contact with family members or neighbors was also an important way of acquiring knowledge about innovations. As shown by Kielbasa and Puchała [67], most farmers see themselves as belonging to the early majority (66%) of the innovation adopter category or as being early



adopters (33%) of new technologies. This means that the first phase of innovation diffusion in which pioneers popularize an innovation in its initial diffusion phase must be carried out by actors other than active farmers.

However, the innovativeness of practices introduced by farmers may raise some doubts. The most common improvements are the modernization or purchase of farm machinery, increasing the number of animals kept on the farm, introducing new species, and introducing automation systems for farm animals. These innovations mean “more of the same” rather than “something new” [66]. Kielbasa and Puchała [67] state that the main purpose of farmers’ innovations is to increase farm productivity and profitability. While understandable from the perspective of farm profitability, this ignores the broader context of sustainability and therefore does not solve the problem of rural decline in general (and in a sense even exacerbates some of its aspects, such as depopulation driven by automation-driven productivity increases). Therefore, the value of these innovations is limited.

An example of new entrants into farming is Martynika Farm, a farm located in south-western Poland that has been run since 2013 by a couple who moved there from Poland’s capital. The owners cultivate the land following permaculture principles but at the same time place great emphasis on complementing agriculture with other activities, such as educational projects or workshops related to agriculture and handicrafts (including permaculture, pottery, and preservation of traditional plant species in the area). Of course, this model has limitations. For example, the scale of farming is very small, and therefore farming cannot serve as the main source of income; workshop participants usually come from urban areas; and the owners pay close attention to the local community, but decisions are mainly made at the individual level. Deciding to live in the countryside and to make a living from agriculture, the owners were aware of many difficulties and tried to prepare for them. As they recall, “Since we knew that we were going to live in the countryside, we were preparing for this. We did the courses because we no longer wanted to do what we had done so far and we felt that we lacked certain skills.” (Interview 2). However, their lack of experience with agriculture contributed to the problems experienced (e.g., in the distribution of products, access to land). The farm struggles but is able to exist based on its various undertakings and in doing so brings social and environmental benefits at the local scale that are consciously chosen by the owners (as of February 2023, the Martynika Farm is temporally inactive due to personal issues).

In order to integrate into the local community, the owners are involved in various activities, such as the Village Housewives’ Circle and the Village Renewal Group. As newcomers, they were aware that establishing a good relationship with the local community is key to functioning harmoniously in the new social environment. It is also important for economic success, as the farm’s business model is primarily based on cooperation and building a dense network of social contacts. Looking more broadly at the village as a whole, however, there is a noticeable lack of networking and cooperation among entities engaged in similar initiatives. Thus, while the activities undertaken by Martynika Farm should be evaluated positively, they are not replicated in the local environment to such an extent that one can speak of synergy in the context of activities undertaken by other entities in the immediate vicinity. In the operation of Martynika Farm, it is important to cooperate with other ecological practitioners (e.g., agrotourism farms, permaculture farms, permaculture NGOs) in terms of agricultural production, agrotourism, and the organization of workshops. Networks provide knowledge transfer and workshop partnerships and thus a basis for self-improvement and the development of their activities. Also key are strong relationships with schools and community centers in the region as the main recipients of child-oriented workshops.

Martynika Farm brings quite a lot to the local community with its activities and has become a vital component. Nevertheless, it appears that due to the rather significant divergence of modes of operation of other local “traditional” farms (and thus the lack of a community with similar interests and needs), the strength of the local social networks

created is not great. A much greater role is played by supra-local networks formed with farms of a similar nature based on strong mutual partnerships and business relationships. The actual impact on local farms may be indirect and consists of their taking over certain elements related to the way Martynika Farm operates.

In order to enhance the ability of Martynika Farm to operate effectively and to facilitate similar initiatives by new actors in agriculture, more external help is needed in terms of policy and institutional support. As a major impediment to their operation is the dispersion of information on various aspects of doing business in the rural area, it would be preferable to set up a system of direct support or at least assistance in accessing information on, for example, access to land, crop selection, supply chain design and marketing, and applying for financial support.

The Martynika Farm case study shows that knowledge transfer—both the flow of local knowledge to incoming villagers and the flow of “new” (external) knowledge to experienced farmers—is not an easy process. It is also apparent that the lack of expertise poses a major challenge for new entrants into farming.

#### 4.4. Successors

Young farmers account for 15% of all active farmers in Poland [68], and the majority began their farming careers as successors [65]. However, this situation is changing, as the importance of market entry into agriculture is growing, and the share of farmers aged 65 and older is steadily increasing at the expense of those under 40 [69,70]. The share of farmers who plan to transfer their farm to successors ranges from 8% to 22% by county [70], and the lack of successors seems to be particularly acute in rural areas that are located within functional urban areas [71].

Successors in Poland are well prepared to take over family farms and are usually over the age of 30, as farmers in Poland typically retire at the age of 60–65. If an older farmer does not decide to pass on their farm earlier, there is a risk that in the meantime the potential successor will start working in another sector [69]. However, Czekaj [70] argues that the age of 30–35 corresponds well with succession, as it is at this age (after a few years of work experience) that people typically decide to start their own business. Nevertheless, almost half of all farm successors have other sources of income [72], and in some cases, succession is only formal. The successor continues to work off the farm, and the older farmer collects a pension but continues to run the farm [70]. In purely economic terms, successors do not fare better than the rest of the farmers in Poland; one in three farms reduce production, and 10% of successors plan to leave farming altogether. Only about 13% of farms increase their production after succession. In contrast, 20% of successors said they were investing or intended to invest in the farm and make it their main focus (and they are the ones most likely to introduce innovations). Two factors distinguish these farmers—the relatively high level of education achieved and the good condition of the inherited farm. The combination of these two factors has resulted in promising prospects for these farms.

The situation whereby farmers who plan for succession invest more in their farms means that successors often start from a better position than new entrants into farming [73]. They also have better access to intergenerational sources of skills and knowledge [74]. A good example of this is another case study selected for analysis, the Ludwik Majlert Farm and the Rysiny Farm, two family businesses engaged in food production and processing located on the outskirts of Warsaw (the capital of Poland). Situated next to each other and run by two branches of the same family, the farms are multigenerational properties dating back to the 19th century. In the 20th century, the farms underwent numerous transformations (due to, e.g., World War 2 and communist governance in Poland). Although they continuously thrived, the farms gradually became smaller. The farms currently offer a wide variety of products that are sold directly to customers (individuals as well as restaurants or local cooperatives) at farm shops. However, they also have significant social and educational functions. For instance, the Ludwik Majlert Farm regularly organizes “dinners in the field” (public events during which the fields are toured and the food from

the farm is eaten together). In addition, farm tours are organized for kindergarten and school-age children, and educational videos about the farm are produced regularly. The Rysiny Farm organizes numerous cultural events on the premises.

The practices of the farms are guided by the idea of producing (and processing) high-quality products that are embedded in the local ecological and social context while providing appropriate income for the organizers. Therefore, it can be considered a sustainable business model. In this case, food is not only a commodity but also a way to forge social connections, to feel the presence of a community around it, and to establish a territorial identity, a connection to the land one cultivates. For this reason, the prices are kept low enough to enable local residents to come regularly but also to provide sufficient income for the businesses. The owners are not thinking about expansion; the idea behind the practice is that there is a threshold beyond which the business loses its key characteristics that made it so successful in the first place. This case suggests a number of factors that led to the adoption of such a model—a combination of family history (as one of the interviewed successors said, “I tried something else. I studied psychology and I try to work on other topics a bit, but I have always been drawn here because it is my family and I like it.”), extensive experience in agriculture, accumulated intergenerational knowledge, disenchantment with corporate food supply chains, personal traits, and potential generated by the proximity of a city in which the local food paradigm is gaining traction.

The synergy and networking effects of Ludwik Majlert Farm and Rysiny Farm result from their cooperation with other farms and food processors who complement the sale of the products in the on-farm stores (thanks to the farms’ many years of operation, the existing network of cooperation is dense and durable). In addition, given the focus on local markets and direct sale channels, the impact is mostly local.

The policy context is considered important by the organizers of the practice, although as a barrier rather than as support. For Ludwik Majlert Farm and Rysiny Farm, the main obstacles derive from the spatial planning policies of the city of Warsaw (pressure on suburban areas). However, the attachment to the land and satisfaction from one’s job makes the farmers indifferent to the potential financial gains from selling the land. The family feels the connection with the land (the history plays a role in that) and are satisfied with the scale of their businesses that allows them to maintain face-to-face contact with customers and create a place that is important for the local community.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

In line with the aim of the paper, the research conducted allows us to identify the most important challenges and constraints associated with rural renewal vis-à-vis newcomers, new entrants, and successors. First and foremost, they involve the need for rural change-makers to possess significant social competencies, including the ability to strike a balance between understanding, respecting the local context, and introducing new forms of action (Table 1). This competence should be balanced with tacit knowledge; in this case, as an initial resource that is “brought” to the area in the case of newcomers. In addition, the phenomenon of newcomers acquiring knowledge about a new way of functioning in different social, economic, and often cultural conditions should be emphasized as important. This, too, is tacit knowledge but is acquired through interaction with traditional locals or other local actors. Recognizing which competencies are non-essential and acquiring the essential ones is a difficult and complex process. This process should therefore be facilitated by institutional support for, among other things, rooting rural entrants, increasing opportunities for social integration, land management, learning about local needs and opportunities for economic activity, and learning the best ways to distribute and sell agricultural products in the case of farmers.

**Table 1.** The most important lessons learned from the examined case studies in relation to newcomers, new entrants, and successors.

Newcomers	New Entrants	Successors
very good and thorough preparation (knowledge) for a new profession and a new role in life	very good and thorough preparation (knowledge) for a new profession and a new role in life	secure land for agriculture (local government land use planning policies)
need to have significant initial capital (e.g., purchase, rental, renovation of real estate, setting up a business)	establish good relations and cooperation with the local “old” inhabitants, including farmers in particular	improve the availability of farmland, which is a prerequisite for combining food production with other functions
balance honest respect for the local context with introducing their own perspectives and values	flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances and not be discouraged by failures	integrate multiple parts of the supply chain and non-agricultural functions
including local residents as co-creators of the practice	need to reduce institutional barriers (particularly access to land) related to the start of agricultural activity by new entrants into farming	reduce institutional difficulty in entering and running a family farm
communication skills to overcome tension between newcomers and locals and to create a feeling of common interest	integration of multiple elements of the supply chain and non-agricultural functions in rural areas (farms, new entrants) and development of practical institutional support	improve access to food markets and distribution
highlight how the perspective of new residents can improve community life and emphasize the importance of things that were previously underestimated by the community	need to have significant initial capital (e.g., purchase, rental, renovation of real estate, setting up a business)	importance of family tradition and attachment to the land
external support or mediation when the local community is unable to overcome its own prejudices against newcomers		possibility of successfully mixing the “old” with the “new” in terms of farming methods and ways of running a farm (including sales), as well as joint involvement of older and younger generations

Source: own study.

On one hand, an important issue is how the “new” villagers will find their way in the local socio-economic realities. On the other hand, it is important that the already existing villagers with the potential to be changemakers are able to be important nodes in the network of connections, thus contributing to the synergy of local resources. In this context, family farms have significant potential for linking the social, environmental, and economic aspects of rural areas. In the process, a focus on local traditional products, strong family ties, and history can significantly affect the willingness of successors or newcomers to farming. This also results in an increase in the variety of products and services offered and the activities carried out. Research conducted in Hungary [26] shows that on farms with a strong family tradition of farming, knowledge acquisition through everyday practices is particularly strong. Respect for locality, which does not exclude “new insights” into development processes, is an important factor in success. It is also a basic catalyst for the process of knowledge transfer and the development of network ties, as we are then dealing with the use of local knowledge and knowledge acquired from outside, which constitutes the possibility of applying new ideas and solutions to the local context.

The conducted research indicates that the successful integration of newcomers in the local community is influential in increasing social activity and can be a catalyst for the flow of knowledge and the process of mutual learning. It should be noted that in rural communities, it is the immediate environment that is the main “area” for acquiring the knowledge and competencies necessary for business. The research conducted also

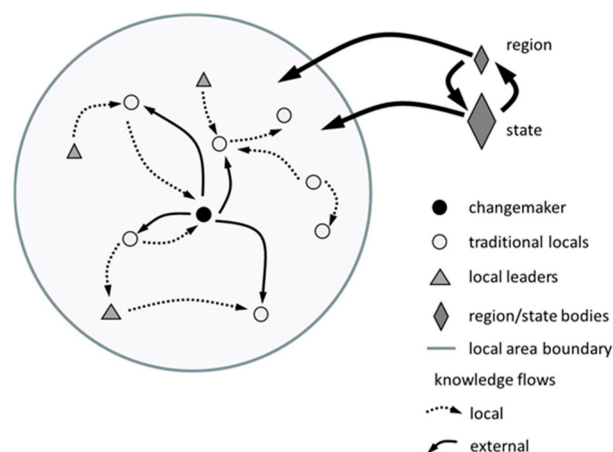
clearly indicates that contacts and direct contact with the nearest families, neighbors, or representatives of various institutions remain the most important sources of knowledge for farmers [74]. Agricultural knowledge is often transferred through farmers' social interactions (see, e.g., [75,76]) based on a common context. The same process is likely to occur for other kinds of economic activity that takes place in rural areas. The conclusions presented above allow us to accept the research hypothesis formulated in the introduction, stating that rural regeneration implemented by new entrants, newcomers, successors in the Polish context is based on knowledge that takes into account local conditions. In addition to factors strictly related to local conditions, reference should be made to the broader context. As far as the described area of research (Poland) is concerned, there is no coherent public policy aimed directly at rural newcomers, new entrants, or successors, and the described practices are carried out mostly as a self-initiated effort without external support. Increasing the proportion of rural newcomers in all three groups of rural changemakers requires the implementation of public policies that significantly increase the attractiveness of rural areas both as places to live and to conduct agricultural and nonagricultural activities. These policies should also take into account the (sometimes somewhat different) needs of all these groups. This would significantly increase the possibility of successful rural regeneration.

The research carried out shows that in relation to all three groups of rural changemakers—newcomers, new entrants, and successors—one of the most important determinants of the actions undertaken is acquiring appropriate formal and informal knowledge through interactions with the local community. Acquiring formal knowledge is related to, among other things, learning how to comprehensively carry out new activities in rural areas (production, distribution, sales), the ability to implement modern solutions to the conditions and peculiarities of these areas, and flexible adaptation to changing conditions. Acquiring informal (i.e., tacit) knowledge is related to, among other things, soft competencies, primarily related to the ability to cooperate and put down roots in the local community, mutual respect, breaking down social barriers, and forming in-depth network relationships (personal, business). These conclusions are in line with the results of studies indicating the strong dependence of tacit knowledge transfer on the social context (i.e., [28,33,45]).

Taking into account the position of changemakers in the network, the issues relating to knowledge flows in local communities are illustrated in Figure 1. Regarding the results of the conducted research, it should be noted that changemakers contribute to the transfer of knowledge and its inflow from the outside. However, at the same time, the success of their efforts is strongly dependent on the absorption of local knowledge. This implies the need to form and deepen networks of connections between different actors. A very big role is played in this case by the activation of synergy processes, which, as a rule, depend on the density of the network. In the context of the observation of Anderson et al. [37] relating to the lower potential for the creation of new knowledge in rural areas due to the much lower density of interactions (networks of relationships), one should note the potentially very large role of the studied groups of rural changemakers, particularly rural newcomers and new entrants. They bring their own network of connections and interactions to the local community, in effect increasing the density of the entire network. On one hand, this requires their skillful integration into the local network (which requires, among other things, an appropriate level of trust). On the other hand, it requires maintaining and strengthening the network relationships they previously developed (with the external environment). A consequence of the described phenomenon is the shortening of the widely understood “distance” to knowledge sources, which is an important factor in knowledge transfer [38,39]).

It is also worth emphasizing that local leaders and regional and state institutions and the policies they create are essential elements in forming networks and facilitating actions taken for rural regeneration.





**Figure 1.** Changers and knowledge flows in local arrangements. Source: own study.

At the same time, it should be noted that although some of the indicated determinants of rural renewal were not directly discussed by the respondents, the described practices indirectly suggest their significant influence on the process. One of the most important determinants seems to be the need to have adequate resources in the form of initial financial capital to start and develop the business. Another group of factors concerned the need for appropriate public policies on, among other things, the protection of agricultural areas; the skillful combination of agricultural and other functions; and comprehensive assistance for those undertaking activities in the area.

While knowledge transfer plays a key role in how rural changemakers contribute to rural regeneration, policymakers should provide appropriate support for newcomers, new entrants, and successors at all stages of their initiatives, starting with creating incentives to move to rural areas (or to stay therein) to sharing knowledge on how one can become a rural changemaker to establishing the practices themselves and, if necessary, to providing assistance once established (e.g., training courses, workshops profiled for specific activities, and conditions of particular areas organized by local and central authorities; activities facilitating integration with the local community and building supralocal network relations; support for the development of local markets; promotion of local producers on supralocal markets). It is therefore crucial to treat renewal as a complex and long-term process rather than a one-time decision. In doing so, it must be borne in mind that the original intentions of newcomers, new entrants, and successors will not always have a full chance of being realized. This gives rise to the need for them to adopt flexible criteria for success, for example, a willingness to recognize success criteria they did not originally consider (such as the respect of the local community).

It seems that the described case studies reflect desirable examples of the direction of the evolution of small-scale agriculture or other rural businesses from the point of view of rural regeneration. This is because they take into account a new way of approaching the functioning of rural areas and are a kind of response to observed social and economic trends. They also show that the process of rural regeneration takes a wide variety of forms and involves the absence of a one-size-fits-all scheme for rural transformation, which also requires strong consideration of the local context in taking action. Reconciling the local context with global challenges and trends is one of the main challenges of the entire rural regeneration process. This implies the need for further in-depth research regarding the possibilities and limitations of combining development that takes into account both local specifics and global trends. Comprehensive recognition is also required to identify all potential groups of rural changemakers and to determine their actual relevance to renewal processes in different geographic, social, and economic contexts.

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