

Staying When Everybody Else Is Leaving: Coping with High Out-Migration in Rural Areas of Serbia

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Abstract : Regions of South-East Europe are characterised by high out-migration for decades. The reasons for leaving range from the hope of a better work situation to a better health care system and beyond. In Serbia, this high out-migration hits the rural areas in particular so that the population number is in the red repeatedly. It might not be hard to guess that this negative population growth has the potential to create different challenges for those who stay in rural areas. So how are they coping with the – statistically proven – high out-migration? Having this in mind, the study is investigating the people's individual awareness of the social phenomenon high out-migration and their daily life strategies in rural areas. Furthermore, the study seeks to find out the people's resilient skills in that context. Is the condition of high out-migration conducive for resilience? The methodology combines a quantitative and a qualitative approach (mixed methods). For the quantitative part, a standardised questionnaire has been developed, including a multiple choice section and a choice experiment. The questionnaire was handed out to people living in rural areas of Serbia only (n = 100). The sheet included questions about people's awareness of high out-migration, their own daily life strategies or challenges and their social network situation (data about the social network was necessary here since it is supposed to be an influencing variable for resilience). Furthermore, test persons were asked to make different choices of coping with high out-migration in a self-designed choice experiment. Additionally, the study included qualitative interviews asking citizens from rural areas of Serbia. The topics asked during the interview focused on their awareness of high out-migration, their daily life strategies, and challenges as well as their social network situation. Results have shown the following major findings. The awareness of high out-migration is not the same with all test persons. Some declare it as something positive for their own life, others as negative or not effecting at all. The way of coping generally depended – maybe not surprising – on the people's social network. However – and this might be the most important finding – not everybody with a certain number of contacts had better coping strategies and was, therefore, more resilient. Here the results show that especially people with high affiliation and proximity inside their network were able to cope better and shew higher resilience skills. The study took one step forward in terms of knowledge about societal resilience as well as coping strategies of societies in rural areas. It has shown part of the other side of nowadays migration's coin and gives a hint for a more sustainable rural development and community empowerment.

Keywords : coping, out-migration, resilience, rural development, social networks, south-east Europe

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