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INNOVATIVE PUBLIC MANAGEMENT TOOLS TO ENSURE RURAL VITALITY THROUGH GENERATIONAL RENEWAL

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Rural development strategies do not ensure generational change, the farming community is rapidly aging, rural governance is faced with inactive participation of residents, and the demographic structure of the village, population, public spaces, and social infrastructure are experiencing many changes that negatively affect the vitality of rural areas. The aging of rural population is characteristic of both developed and developing countries around the world. The aim of the study is to identify innovative public management measures for generational renewal in rural areas. The study used literature analysis, synthesis, comparison, case analysis and other traditional scientific research methods. Using the case study method, innovations that can help manage generational renewal in rural areas were identified: a multi-level approach, access to land, innovation in financing models, community solutions, digital transformation, practical experience, networking. Effective strategies for attracting and retaining younger generations in rural communities include four key areas: robust job opportunities and entrepreneurship support, community engagement and trust-building initiatives, hands-on educational and professional development programs, and quality-of-life enhancements such as work-life balance and affordable local amenities. The innovative public management tools to ensure rural vitality through generational renewal are not limited to political measures alone but require the creation of an entire system encompassing different levels: international, national, regional, community, family, individual.

Keywords: *generational renewal; rural areas; public management.*

INTRODUCTION

When discussing generational renewal in rural areas, we usually mean the situation where the older generation passes on farms, traditions, knowledge and responsibilities to the younger generation. This can create both challenges and opportunities. Most often, in order to manage generational changes, special attention is paid to the implementation of technologies, social innovations, support for young farmers, development of rural tourism and alternative activities, education and mentoring, sustainable development (organic farming, marketing of local products, circular economy models).

Effective local policies and the use of unique local resources are crucial to mitigate and adapt to the challenges of depopulation. Research insights (Mróz & Zwęglińska-Gałecka, 2025) show that over-reliance on external resources to improve quality of life, rather than prioritizing the optimization of innovative and adaptive local government operating models, is a major concern, with some rural areas falling into decline despite significant EU and national structural support.

Rural revitalization strategies indicate that rural governance is still faced with the lack of active participation of residents in rural public spaces, institutions are undergoing many changes, and trends of decline and atrophy can be observed. In order to restore public spaces, we should pay attention to the creation and maintenance of existing resources, and encourage non-governmental organizations to participate in the creation and implementation of a new role - the role of social media (Wang, Liu & Wu, 2021).

One of the adaptive strategies that should maximize benefits for the population is the strategy of ensuring generational renewal (Syssner and Meijer 2020). Place-based policies help adapt international and national level interventions to local characteristics and resources, combining bottom-up and top-down approaches. As a tool to increase

vitality of ageing rural community scientists recognize servitization, the involvement of elder generation into economic and social life (Vidickiene & Gedminaite-Raudone, 2019).

The object of the study is innovative public management measures that can help with the challenges of generational renewal in rural areas.

The aim of the study is to identify innovative public management measures for generational renewal in rural areas.

The study used literature analysis, synthesis, comparison, case analysis, and other traditional scientific research methods.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to achieve the EU's goal of creating healthy and sustainable food systems, becoming climate neutral, and halting biodiversity loss, it is important to create and/or preserve viable rural areas (Nicholas & Scown, 2024). Rural vitality is the ability of a rural area to sustain and develop its social, economic, and ecological systems over time to ensure the well-being of its residents (Vujicic et al., 2013). Rural vitality has been recognized as an important starting point for solving rural development problems (Luo et al., 2024). Rural vitality is also described as a valuable policy instrument for identifying key issues in rural development and finding specific responses (Pan et al., 2025). Humans are the main force of rural vitality, with human capital – skills, education, and innovation – driving sustainable development of rural areas. The vitality of rural areas is one of the key public goods that can ensure the sustainable development of regions (Mihai et al., 2019). Nevertheless, significant demographic changes are noticeable in rural areas (Garbaccio et al., 2018). The aging of rural populations is characteristic of both developed and developing countries around the world (Cohen & Greaney, 2023; Zhao, 2022). This means that there is a real threat to the economic, environmental, cultural, and social development of rural areas. As researchers (Makkonen & Inkinen, 2024) emphasize, everything we are currently facing is the result of long-term processes that have been taking place in rural areas for many years or decades. According to Nori et al. (2019), "agriculture and rural development provided little incentives for decent livelihoods, as these have in many countries been overlooked for decades in policy frameworks. Policies have been conceived to favour urban consumers rather than rural producers". With the decline in the importance of the agricultural sector, infrastructure facilities, and employment opportunities (Kuliešis, Pareigienė, 2014), young people sought opportunities in cities or even other countries. Agriculture and rural life have become less attractive to young people for a variety of reasons, such as agriculture being less stable and not providing a steady income, land resources being concentrated in the hands of the older generation, young people seek higher education, but rural areas lack or have insufficiently developed diversity of other economic activities, etc. (Marbun, 2024).

Studies report that attracting and retaining younger rural residents relies on a mix of economic, social, educational, and quality-of-life strategies. The analyzed scientific literature sources indicate that economic approaches emphasizing robust job opportunities, entrepreneurship support, and asset-based development are key. Job prospects and career opportunities emerged as major pull factors (Ehrke et al., 2021, Schmitt-Wilson et al., 2020). Social and cultural approaches also play an important role. Studies conducted by researchers (Bernsen et al., 2022; Guzman et al., 2020; Theodori & Theodori, 2015) show that community engagement, trust-building, leadership opportunities, and family- or tradition-oriented values help form attractive, supportive environments. Studies (Bernsen et al., 2022; Theodori & Theodori, 2015) have identified educational strategies, including internships, community-based learning and professional growth opportunities, as effective means of building skills and reinforcing commitment. Enhancements in quality of life, such as work–life balance, access to affordable amenities, and local branding efforts, are noted in Atkočiūnienė & Šimkienė (2023) studies as reinforcing factors that sustain rural vitality.

The implementation of rural revitalization strategies is a well-established approach used to solve common rural problems (Luo et al., 2024). Research conducted by scientists (Makkonen & Kahila, 2020) show that vitality policy should be holistic, based on measures for the development of rural regions, covering several policy sectors and a network (system) of public, private, and third sector organizations, with local government at its center. When formulating and implementing plans to maintain the vitality of rural areas, it is recommended to take into account the local economic, social, cultural, and administrative realities and to develop and plan appropriate measures accordingly (Shao et al., 2022).

Innovative public management tools are essential for enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of rural development programs, particularly in the context of generational renewal. These tools enable public managers to adapt to the evolving needs of communities and to integrate stakeholder participation into the planning and implementation processes. However, innovative public management tools in declining rural areas show varied impacts, with targeted, integrated approaches that combine policies with service delivery producing better youth retention and economic development outcomes than asset-based methods alone.

Several studies report that targeted, integrated approaches yield more positive outcomes. In a Romanian rural municipality, multi-level participative governance combined with a circular bioeconomy strategy led 42% of young people to expect local opportunities. The initiative also generated 26 startups, more than 22 new jobs, and €22.7 million in turnover (Sebestyén, 2024). Youth-oriented regional development policies in parts of Austria and Germany stabilized migration trends by increasing in-migration and fostering job creation in sectors like healthcare, tourism, and technology (Schorn, 2023). According to him, the integration of multiple measures (employment, housing, work-family compatibility) was reported as key to success. The study also noted that external societal trends (such as refugee movements and counter-urbanization) played a role. Lee (2021) reported that housing support and residential environment management by local governments in Korea were associated with a higher intention of young adults to remain in rural

areas, especially in regions with low economic potential. Asset-based community development efforts enhanced community engagement and perceptions but did not consistently result in higher retention rates (Kammer-Kerwick et al., 2022). Fritsch et al. (2018) examined a community leadership program targeting millennials in rural Minnesota. The study reported significant gains in community development competencies. The study suggested that such programs could enhance youth retention by fostering a sense of agency and belonging, though direct retention outcomes were not reported. Leadership and capacity-building were also central in Sebestyén (2024), where participatory governance and stakeholder engagement were part of the bioeconomic strategy. In addition, Sebestyén (2024) reported that multi-level participative governance and the circular bioeconomy fostered cooperation, innovation, and youth engagement.

Researchers (Makkonen & Kahila, 2021; Mróz & Zwęglińska-Gałecka, 2025) recommend shifting rural development measures towards holistic, systemic and place-based "viability policies", which would include softer development values related to attractive living environments, community spirit and population well-being, but note that if (traditional) corporate and industrial policies fail, other policy measures will have limited impact on rural development. Also the stakeholders who form the quadruple spiral (representatives of the public, private, non-governmental, education and scientific sectors) of rural development actors are very important.

The analysis of good practice examples (GPE) was based on the assumption that the vitality of rural areas is ensured by generational renewal (Makkonen & Kahila, 2021), and that rural development needs to be directed away from competitiveness and (traditional) corporate and industrial policies towards holistic, systemic and place-based "viability policies", encompassing softer development values related to an attractive living environment, community spirit and the well-being of residents (Makkonen & Kahila, 2021).

The sample was collected by searching on Google. After identifying and analyzing 38 cases, it was determined that innovative public management tools to ensure rural vitality through generational renewal are not limited to political measures alone but require the creation of an entire system encompassing different levels: international, national, regional, community, family, individual. GPEs were selected based on the following criteria: 1) they reflect diverse EU countries' experiences in managing generational change; 2) they cover multiple governance levels; 3) they demonstrate potential for adaptation to the Lithuanian context; 4) they are based on publicly accessible and verifiable information. Six cases were selected for analysis. The evaluation of good practice examples was based on the following criteria: 1) generational change management level – assessed through the territorial and organizational scope of the initiative; 2) impact – evaluated by identifying the domains affected by the issues the practice aims to address; 3) sustainability – examined through dimensions that indicate the potential for long-term operation and continuity; 4) innovativeness – the extent to which the practice introduces new or advanced approaches.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The case study method aimed to identify innovations that can help manage generational renewal in rural areas. Six cases were analyzed according to the following criteria: level of management tool, essence, methods, sustainability, Innovation (Table 1).

Table 1. Analysis of good practice examples of generational renewal process management

Level and titles of management tool	Case Description	Methodological Approach	Sustainability	Innovation
International level management tool: EU CAP (Common Agricultural Policy) Network thematic group "Gen Z: Leading the next generation in agriculture"	CAP network is designed to facilitate easier access for young people to agriculture. Provides opportunities for young farmers to acquire land, agricultural innovations and technologies, creating a community network and learning system.	Offers recommendations for EU CAP policies when supporting young people entering agriculture, using all available technologies and innovations for sustainable agriculture, creating community information networks, cooperation, training and innovation implementation.	The research group operates for an extended period, formulating long-term CAP policy recommendations. These recommendations become official through CAP Network publications and influence the development of strategic plans at national policy levels.	Focuses not only on supporting young people in agriculture, but also on the acquisition of innovative and sustainable technologies and training young farmers through network-based organization.
National level management tool: "BioBoden" cooperative - ecological land preservation and young farmer support system in Germany	The "BioBoden" cooperative purchases land and rents it to young and organic farmers at affordable prices, supporting small farms, young farmers, and sustainable farming systems.	Young people receive access to affordable rental of agricultural land. Real career prospects in ecological farming. Farmer community and social capital development. Education and mentoring activities for young people and ecological farmers.	Long-term, institutionalized relationships, cooperative solutions. The "BioBoden" cooperative was founded in 2015 and has grown significantly, land lease agreements with a 10-year renewal period ensure access to land. The "BioBoden" fund established allows for the permanent preservation of land for organic farmers. The system integrates with the national organic farming policy and forms an alternative land	Innovative community land financing models, where land is acquired in speculative markets and long-term land leases are concluded, guarantee its availability to young organic farmers. The collective use of capital by cooperative members to acquire land creates a unique alternative to traditional land ownership models, effectively addressing the barrier of lack of capital for young farmers.

			ownership model in Germany.	
Regional level management tool: "Green Belt Pays de Béarn" program, Pau metropolitan region in France	Approximately 2 hectares of land are purchased from private investors and public funding, using EU CAP funds and other sources, and then distributed to young farmers to enable them to farm and make a living. They are trained in food and agricultural skills and are encouraged to continue farming traditions. The aim of the programme is to create a sustainable, independent farming community.	Provides youth with: various farming equipment, technical consultations and mentoring; entrepreneurship support - access to city markets, formation of subscriber baskets, cooperation with restaurants and hotels; technological-robotic systems for agricultural land use to optimize irrigation processes.	Strong commitment from regional authorities, cooperation between the agricultural and private sectors ensures long-term political support and sustainability of the program. 8 farms have been established, all implementing a local vision. These farms produce more than 240 tons of vegetables per year for local consumption.	This program innovatively applies a hybrid financing model that combines EU CAP subsidies with private investments and public funding, creating a sustainable loan system that establishes a sustainable mechanism for young farmer establishment. "Keys in hand" principle with fully equipped farms, technical mentoring and direct market access packages is a revolutionary approach that eliminates traditional barriers to young people entering agriculture.
Community level management tool: CSA - community supported agriculture	Creates a community of agricultural consumers that financially supports local food production, where consumers pay in advance for agricultural products from farmers each year. This allows farmers to receive investment for the upcoming season, and consumers to secure products and, if desired, participate in agricultural activities.	CSA activities support direct partnerships between consumer groups and farmers – subscribers (-consumers) – where the risks, responsibilities and rewards of agricultural activities are shared under long-term contracts. Consumers agree to provide direct, up-front support for local farmers' production, and producers receive up-front payments from consumers in local markets. CSA allows for investments in pre-planned seasonal work (or farm labor) and payments for next year's food purchases.	Long-term partnership between local communities and farmers – consumers share the risks and rewards with farmers, while upfront payments provide farmers with financial stability and independence from market fluctuations. The program builds stable social ties and a support network. The CSA self-sustaining model operates without external subsidies and can adapt to local conditions.	Innovative, long-term risk and responsibility sharing between consumers and farmers, replacing the traditional product acquisition and payment model with community, partnership relationships, and advance payments. Economic stability and integration of social ties create a unique economic model of consumer community support, which protects farmers from market fluctuations and creates a direct partnership between producers and consumers.
Family level management tool: Senkova Domacija - family farm in Slovenia	The farmer participates in the WWOOF network. The farm accepts young people from 18 years of age who are willing and able to gain practical experience in growing vegetables, learn about diversified, organic farming and harvesting, take care of animals, prepare for independent farming, work together with experienced farmers, and learn traditional and new sustainable agricultural practices.	The WWOOF mentoring program brings together young people from all over the world to help with farm work and learn about farming. The global approach is a hands-on "learning by doing" approach – living and working directly on a family farm. It also develops travel skills. Young people gain skills, build relationships with farmers, learn about farming, and can start their own farming business.	The farm is based on a 500-year family farming tradition, successful agricultural operations and a profitable tourism business. It receives income from various sources. The farmer builds a permanent community through international volunteers with various skills and profitable tourism development.	The farmer is innovatively combining 500 years of tradition with the global WWOOF network, transforming a historic family farm into an international center for practical agricultural education. The principle of "learning by doing", implemented through authentic family farming with youth from abroad, creates a unique model of cultural heritage preservation and global sustainable agricultural leadership development, encouraging young people to create their own farms.
Individual level management tool: Rural life influencers participation on "Facebook", "Instagram", "TikTok"	Rural life influencers act as "bridges" between urban and rural real life, creating a positive rural image, breaking stereotypes and demonstrating rural living advantages through authentic, attractive rural content on social networks.	Stories about rural life and agricultural work on social media help to dispel stereotypes about rural areas. Authentic images help to form a positive perception of rural life. Sharing information on social media through the formation of subjective norms influences young people's choice to live in the countryside and engage in agricultural activities. When family members, colleagues and managers support rural life, young people are more likely to follow this example.	The activities of rural life influencers depend on personal motivation, authenticity of content, personal experience, and do not require large financial investments. Financial sustainability is ensured by organically growing audiences – when influencers earn income from social networks, guaranteed through mass youth engagement. When influencers change or cease to operate, this activity remains popular.	Rural influencers are innovatively applying the traditional digital communication model, which uses social media platforms to create authentic rural content and break stereotypes. Personal storytelling and mass-impact communication through social media platforms create a new method of popularizing rural life, which organically reaches millions of young audiences and changes their perspective on the possibilities of rural life.

Analysis of these tools enables understanding of how generational renewal challenges in rural areas are addressed at various levels and what innovations are applied to ensure rural vitality.

At the international level, the *EU CAP (Common Agricultural Policy) Network thematic group "GenZ: Leading the next generation in agriculture"* stands out as a strategic instrument facilitating young people's entry into agriculture. The innovation of this tool manifests not only in creating youth support mechanisms but also in systematic attention to the acquisition of innovative and sustainable technologies and the development of training systems for young farmers through network-based organization. The sustainability of this GPP is ensured through long-term operational principles – the research group formulates long-term CAP policy recommendations that become official documents and influence strategic planning at the national level. This illustrates how international tools can transform local opportunities through structural policy change.

At national and regional levels, tools addressing land access problems dominate – revealing that land acquisition remains the primary barrier for young people starting farming activities. The *BioBoden cooperative in Germany* demonstrates radical financing model innovation: the cooperative purchases land from speculative markets and leases it to young ecological farmers through long-term contracts, thus separating land from capital ownership models. This tool is innovative in that it applies to a community land financing model that guarantees land accessibility through cooperative members' collective capital and effectively addresses the capital barrier problem for young farmers.

A similar hybrid financing model is applied by the *"Green Belt Pays de Béarn" program in France*, which combines EU CAP subsidies with private investments and public funding, creating a sustainable loan system. The program's innovation lies in the "keys in hand" principle: young farmers receive fully equipped farms, technical mentoring, and direct market access packages. This is a revolutionary approach that eliminates traditional barriers to young people entering agriculture.

At the community level, *CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) programs* stand out, innovatively applying a risk and responsibility sharing model between consumers and farmers. This tool transforms the traditional product-payment relationship into community partnership with advance payment. CSA program sustainability is high due to the community and farmer partnership principle – consumers take on risks and benefits together with farmers, while advance payments provide financial stability and independence from market fluctuations. Economic stability and social connection create a unique consumer community support economic model that protects farmers from market fluctuations and creates direct producer-consumer partnership relationships.

Operating at the family level, *farm in Slovenia* demonstrates a unique model of cultural heritage preservation and global sustainable agricultural leadership education. Participating in the WWOOF network, this 500-year-old family farm accepts young people from around the world for practical training. Innovation manifests in the synthesis of 500 years of tradition with the global WWOOF network, which transforms a historical family farm into an international practical agricultural education center. The "learning by doing" principle is implemented through authentic family farming with international young people, encouraging them to establish their own farms.

Tools operating at the individual level aim to transform dominant narratives about rural life. *Rural life influencers on social networks (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok)* innovatively apply a digitization model of traditional rural communication, using social network platforms for authentic rural content creation and stereotype dismantling. The connection of personal storytelling and mass impact through social network platforms creates a new rural life popularization method that organically reaches millions of young people and changes their attitudes toward rural living possibilities.

CONCLUSIONS

Innovative public management tools that couple targeted policies with integrated service delivery are associated with improved youth retention and economic activity, whereas approaches relying solely on asset mapping tend to shift perceptions without a reliable effect on long-term stay in rural areas. Effective strategies for attracting and retaining younger generations in rural communities include four key areas: robust job opportunities and entrepreneurship support, community engagement and trust-building initiatives, hands-on educational and professional development programs, and quality-of-life enhancements such as work-life balance and affordable local amenities.

In summary, the reviewed studies support a multi-pronged strategy:

- Economic improvements through job creation, entrepreneurship, and asset mapping.
- Social and cultural initiatives that build community support, trust, and leadership opportunities.
- Educational and skill development programs that offer hands-on experience and professional growth.
- Quality-of-life enhancements that address work-life balance, affordability, and local amenities.
- Collectively, these elements align with observed trends in rural attraction and retention among younger populations.

International and regional GPEs are mainly related to improving conditions for young people to acquire land. They form attitudes, guidelines for national and other documents and initiatives that encourage young people to settle in rural areas. National and regional GPEs are mainly related to improving conditions for young people to acquire land, equipment and qualifications – skills, network building and rural infrastructure improvement. Community GPEs are related to promoting young farmers' community entrepreneurship, knowledge and skills sharing, and building networks between consumers and farmers. Family GPEs – mainly encourage young people to settle in rural areas through the transfer of practical skills on how to live in rural areas and do farm work directly to young people – by working and living on farms.

Individual GPEs encourage young people to settle in rural areas through influencer activities on social networks, mentoring, personal examples, participation in policy and public opinion formation, conferences, discussions, and various organizational activities.

The innovative public management tools to ensure rural vitality through generational renewal are not limited to political measures alone but require the creation of an entire system encompassing different levels: international, national, regional, community, family, individual. The empirical study identified public management tools that help ensure generational renewal in rural areas: multi-level approach, land access, innovation in financing models, community-based solutions, digital transformation, practical experience, network building.

The combination of public management tools at the international, national, community, family and individual levels should reinforce each other through sharing functions and coordinating actions, practical support between levels, community involvement, skills transfer and personal motivation, creating a synergy that maximizes the effectiveness of rural generational renewal.

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