

Abstract

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Collaborative and Cooperative Approaches to Sustainable Rural Community Development

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In a March 2019 *New York Times* editorial, economist Paul Krugman argued that we need to get “real about rural America [and that] nobody knows how to reverse the Heartland’s decline.” There is some truth to these pessimistic sentiments. There are counties in Illinois with populations that peaked a century ago. Rural places are experiencing youth outmigration, school consolidation, declining access to healthcare, a digital divide, and struggling main street economies. In the face of these realities, we argue that strategic visioning programs and cooperative development strategies can stabilize rural populations, while promoting economic development.

We specifically report on our community strategic visioning program, which helps communities restore declining downtowns, increase access to broadband, improve rural housing, while expanding recreational opportunities. Mattoon, one of our client communities, secured a Google Impact Challenge award for their business incubator initiative.

We also report on several cooperative development projects, including two rural grocery store cooperatives that help address food deserts, and a fish processing cooperative along the Illinois River. The *New York Times* reported on the Great Scott grocery cooperative in Winchester, Illinois, a project we helped to organize. These strategies help counter the negative narrative that rural communities are not sustainable. To the contrary, innovative community and economic development strategies help to ensure a bright future for rural places. At a philosophical level, this presentation documents our embrace of praxis: We take our theoretical research on cooperation and apply it in specific places to promote economic, social, and environmental sustainability.