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**TRANSFORMATIVE CAPACITIES OF RURAL SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL
SYSTEMS UNDER SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL CRISES: EVIDENCE FROM
SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE (CROATIA)**

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Rural areas worldwide are increasingly confronted with internal and external challenges, such as demographic decline, economic restructuring and ineffective governance, alongside overlapping global crises, such as cultural homogenization and environmental pressures related to climate change. In Europe, these challenges are particularly pronounced in (semi-)peripheral rural contexts, where long-term structural vulnerabilities intersect with new social-ecological pressures. In response, rural sociology has increasingly turned to the social-ecological systems (SES) framework to better conceptualize and empirically investigate rural resilience. However, while scholarly attention has been devoted to adaptive and coping capacities of rural social-ecological systems (RSESs), more empirical research is still needed on their transformative capacities.

We rely on a case study from SouthEastern Europe and explore the capacities of Croatian RSEs for adaptive resilience but also for transformative change in times of global and local social-ecological crises, by focusing on rural inhabitants' quality of life and subjective well-being. The study draws on mixed-methods empirical data from the "SECRURAL" research project (UIP-2019-04-5257; 2020-2024) and ongoing research within the "TRANSFORM_RURAL" project (IP-2025-02-8001; 2025-2028), funded by the Croatian Science Foundation. Empirical findings indicate that Croatian rural areas display significant adaptive and coping capacities rooted in social networks, informal practices, such as food self-provisioning, and strong place attachment. However, rural communities also possess latent transformative capacities grounded in social relations, local knowledge and everyday practices. Still, transformative capacities remain unrecognized and unsupported within existing governance frameworks, which tend to prioritize short-term adaptation and the maintenance of existing socio-ecological arrangements. As a consequence, potentially transformative initiatives are often marginalized, contributing to the reproduction of structural vulnerabilities and limiting opportunities for long-term sustainability and improved quality of life in rural areas.

We argue that moving beyond an adaptive resilience paradigm toward a transformation-oriented approach is essential for understanding rural futures under conditions of contemporary social-ecological crises, risks and uncertainties.

Palavras-chave: rural transformation; transformative capacities; social-ecological system; quality of life; croatia.