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Published in:
Geographical Journal

DOI:
10.1111/geoj.12541

Publication date:
2023

Citation for published version (APA):
Woods, M. (2023). Rural recovery or rural spatial justice? Responding to multiple crises for the British countryside. *Geographical Journal*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1111/geoj.12541

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Download date: 14. Dec. 2024

Received: 19 March 2023 | Revised: 13 June 2023 | Accepted: 15 August 2023

DOI: 10.1111/geoj.12541

THE GJ Royal Geographical Society with IBG WILEY

SPECIAL SECTION

Rural recovery or rural spatial justice? Responding to multiple crises for the British countryside

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Funding information
This paper draws on research funded by Horizon 2020 grant agreement 726960 (IMAJINE) and Horizon 2020 grant agreement 727988 (ROBUST).

Abstract

This commentary proposes the adoption of a spatial justice approach to understanding the multiple crises facing rural Britain and developing policy responses. It introduces spatial justice as a concept rooted in urban studies but recently extended by an emerging literature on rural spatial justice, and outlines a multidimensional framework in which spatial justice may be concerned with the actual and perceived distribution of resources and opportunities and the power dynamics behind these patterns, with the right of individuals to access, live in and shape spaces, or with normative models for a fair future. The remainder of the paper explores the potential for applying this framework to challenges for the British countryside, briefly considering three resulting statements: first, that there are internal disparities and injustices in the geographical impact of contemporary challenges within rural Britain that are obscured by political and media discourses of a 'rural crisis'; second, that the capacity of rural communities to respond to challenges is uneven and has been eroded by recent socioeconomic pressures and policy decisions; and third, that we need an open discussion about what spatial justice looks like for the countryside of the future.

KEYWORDS
crisis, rural recovery, scenarios, spatial justice, United Kingdom

1 | INTRODUCTION

It is an easy statement to make that rural Britain is confronted by multiple crises. The COVID-19 pandemic has left its scars on rural communities, businesses and labour markets as it has everywhere. Brexit has produced specific challenges for rural economies and societies, in new barriers to trade, uncertainties over funding for agriculture and for community development, and the changed status of EU migrant workers. The financial precarity of rural households and businesses has been compounded by inflated consumer and energy costs, the impacts of which are accentuated in remote rural areas by over-reliance on private transport and on oil for heating. These pressures have been layered on top of the weakening of public services in rural districts in a decade of austerity policies, and the longer-term trajectories of social and economic restructuring, including declining employment in traditional industries, demographic ageing and, for some

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rural communities, depopulation. Looking ahead, the climate crisis will introduce further instability, including questions around rural land use that may be perceived as threatening rural identities.

We could therefore perhaps speak of a rural 'polycrisis', borrowing a term coined to describe challenges facing the European Union in the wake of the 2008 financial meltdown (Zeitlin et al., 2019), or a rural 'permacrisis', a phrase popularised in the British media in 2022 (Turnbull, 2022). Certainly, a scan of both academic and popular literature over the past 50 years suggests a countryside in perpetual crisis, and references to 'rural crisis' are also widespread in research in countries beyond Britain, including Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United States and many parts of Europe. In Britain, the notion of a 'rural crisis' or a 'countryside crisis' has been repeatedly articulated since the 1970s with reference to issues around conservation conflicts, economic restructuring, agricultural incomes, the closure of rural services, and political debates around hunting and the management of the BSE and Foot and Mouth epidemics (Greer, 2003; Pye-Smith & Rose, 1984; Woods, 2005).

However, as Greer (2003) observed about the challenges facing rural Britain at the start of the century, the idea of a 'countryside crisis' does not necessarily fit with conventional social science understandings of a crisis as a sudden, unanticipated policy problem (see also Bessant [2007] on 'crises' in Canadian farming):

> Indeed, it might be argued that although the British countryside has been blighted by a number of severe problems in recent years, these disparate issues should not be conflated into a countryside or rural crisis. For one thing, the countryside is remarkably diverse, and the same problems do not necessarily afflict all areas or impact on them equally.
>
> (Greer, 2003, p. 523)

Accordingly, it may be more correct to assert not that rural Britain has been in perpetual crisis, but that there has been a pervasive and persistent narrative of 'rural crisis' reproduced over several decades. In some periods, this narrative has been inflated and amplified for political effect, notably in the Countryside Alliance protests of the early 2000s and in representations of difficulties in some farming sectors around the same time (Greer, 2003; Woods, 2005). More routinely, the narrative of rural crisis has become embedded as one of the ways in which some members of rural communities make sense of the changes occurring around them. Neal and Walters (2006), for example, noted that in their research on English rural communities, members of Young Farmers Clubs tended to evoke a 'rural crisis narrative' in which the traditional harmonious rural community was represented as being under threat, which they contrasted to a 'rural idyll narrative', more commonly articulated by members of Women's Institutes, in which the harmonious community was very much still in existence. In slightly different formulations, da Silva et al. (2016) in Portugal, and Norman and Power (2015) in Canada both present the 'rural crisis narrative' as a frame projected onto rural areas from outside, representing them as 'backward', declining and in need of change, positioned against more optimistic narratives of rural renaissance. Researchers of course do not stand outside these discursive practices. The decision by researchers to employ the language of 'crisis' or to frame their studies in relation to perceived crises itself reproduces the notion of crisis as a feature of rural life.

These questions around the definition and representation of 'crisis' in rural contexts also have salience for parallel discussions around 'rural recovery'. Crisis and recovery are closely related. To overcome crises, recovery is required; while the idea of recovery implies both that there is a crisis to recover from, and a previous state of normalcy that can be returned to. The COVID-19 pandemic presents a clear example of this. It was, to follow Greer's (2003) definition, a sudden and unanticipated policy problem, and has required governmental interventions to support the recovery of the economy and society from the impact of the emergency measures to their pre-crisis condition. Rural recovery from the pandemic is therefore a definable and achievable objective. However, when a 'rural crisis' is represented as having multiple dimensions, some of which are linked to long-term trends with incremental effects, the notion of recovery is more problematic. Indeed, Turnbull (2022) more broadly observes that the linguistic slippage from 'polycrisis' to 'permacrisis' 'implies that we now see our crises as situations that can only be managed, not resolved'.

The strategy of managing crises rather than aiming for recovery is conveyed in the concept of resilience and its burgeoning associated academic literature, including work on rural resilience (Anthopoulou et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2020; McManus et al., 2012). Although some iterations elide resilience and recovery, as the ability to 'bounce back', the dominant strand of the literature now tends to conceptualise resilience as adaptability or coping, as the ability to withstand crisis (Welsh, 2014). In a study of rural responses to the post-2008 economic crisis in Greece, Papadopoulos et al. (2019) similarly emphasise the coping strategies of individual rural residents. Yet, there is a risk that these approaches denude rural actors of agency, implying that they cannot change structural conditions, but must find ways to cope and adapt. As

such, the challenges facing rural areas are depoliticised, relegating questions about the power relations behind them, or the ‘fairness’ of policy responses.

In this short commentary, I make the case for a shift in language from ‘crisis’, ‘recovery’ and ‘resilience’, to that of rural spatial justice. Spatial justice, I argue, provides a framework for analysing the challenges faced by rural communities that can accommodate multiple dimensions and historical perspectives, and which affords a view on both structural power relations and the capacity of rural actors to shape their own future. As a normative concept it focuses attention not on merely coping, or on recovery, but on envisioning a more just future for rural communities. In the next section, I outline the principles of rural spatial justice and in the remainder of the article I briefly apply three insights from spatial justice to discuss responses to the challenges currently facing rural Britain. In doing so, I draw on research from two Horizon 2020 projects: IMAJINE, focused on spatial justice and territorial inequalities, including statistical analysis of regional disparities, an online panel survey, interviews with regional stakeholders, and participatory scenario-building (see www.imajine-project.eu); and ROBUST, focused on rural–urban synergies, which included co-production of a Rural Vision for Wales, involving stakeholder workshops, an online survey and secondary data analysis (see Woods et al., 2021).

2 | RURAL SPATIAL JUSTICE

The concept of spatial justice has had a long gestation in human geography and continues to elude simple definition. While some usages treat spatial justice as an extension of social justice and tend to emphasise inequalities in geographical patterns of the distribution of resources and the structural processes behind them, other renderings highlight questions around individual capabilities and capacities, the right to space and place, and access to power. The imprecision reflects the bifurcated origins of the concept, one strand being rooted in notions of ‘territorial justice’ and the spatial aspects of social justice explored by radical urban geographers and sociologists in the 1960s and 1970s (Davies, 1968; Harvey, 1973), and the other strand emerging from Henri Lefebvre's writing on the production of space and the ‘right to the city’ (Lefebvre, 1968). These influences were combined in a content and values focused concept of spatial justice articulated by Pirie (1983) and resurrected by critical scholars in the 2000s with both an analytical emphasis on the production of space as an act of (in)justice, and a normative commitment to the equitable spatial distribution of resources, services and access as a basic human right (Dikeç, 2001; Santana Rivas, 2012; Soja, 2009, 2010). Soja (2010), in particular, stressed the duality of spatial justice as process and spatial justice as outcome.

A degree of multiplicity is hence deeply embedded in theorisation of spatial justice and may potentially be pushed further. For example, although some applications of spatial justice have focused primarily on patterns of geographical inequalities, the foregrounding of justice introduces a qualitative dimension not present in more mechanical, quantitative analyses of inequality, and thus can encompass perceived as well as measured inequalities and their contribution to claims of injustice. Bringing together these perspectives, we can outline a multidimensional framework for researching spatial justice along five lines of enquiry:

1. The mapping of territorial inequalities, reflecting concerns with the geographical distribution of resources.
2. Analysis of the differentiated ability of individuals and social groups to access and live in certain spaces, and to participate in the reproduction of these spaces, recalling Lefebvre's ‘right to the city’ and his linked ‘right to difference’.
3. Interrogating the political-economic production of spatial inequalities, evoking the active reproduction of geographical difference by the state and power elites.
4. Exploration of perceptions of spatial injustice, recognising that inequalities may not only be material but also perceived and include disparities in the distribution of power.
5. Articulation of spatial justice as a normative model for envisioning more just spatial relations and an emancipatory politics based on the empowerment of communities.

This framework can be mobilised at different scales and in different settings, including the small but growing body of work on rural spatial justice. Although Soja (2010) notes that ‘the search for spatial justice [is] relevant at many different geographical scales, from the most global to the most local, and everywhere in between’ (p. 6), he nonetheless links spatial justice to the urban condition, focusing on the city as the crucible of struggles over social justice that are embedded in uneven geographies and the regulation and contestation of urban space. As Varró (2012) observed, geographical research on spatial justice had until recently been primarily concentrated on urban contexts, including Soja's work in Los Angeles and Dikeç's (2001) research on Paris.

There are nonetheless similar dynamics at play in rural environments and the contours of a 'rural spatial justice' have started to be articulated in the last 5 years, notably by Johansen et al. (2021), Nordberg (2020, 2021), Shucksmith et al. (2021) and Zhu and Guo (2022). These contributions have tended to lean towards a Lefebvrean understanding of spatial justice, blended with influences from the capabilities approach in wider justice scholarship, to focus on the capacities of rural communities to shape their own futures. Shucksmith et al. (2021), for instance, approach spatial justice through a lens that emphasises facets of the plurality and diversity of places, mobilisation of local participation and capacity building, and dynamics of governance and power, which they employ empirically to examine the capabilities of a rural development initiative in the north of England to promote spatial justice.

These concerns with capabilities, plurality and diversity also emphasise the interconnections between spatial justice and wider questions of social justice and racial justice. Identities and experiences of (in)justice are intersectional. Rural identities are entwined with identities of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, age, ability, religion and culture, and inequalities structured around these identities have a bearing both on (perceived) injustices against rural places and on the differential realisation of individual 'rights to place'. In this sense, the multiple dimensions of spatial justice may on occasion conflict: support for populism in rural communities that feel 'left behind' or neglected may advance anti-immigration and cultural nationalist positions that discriminate on racial grounds and limit the rights of ethnic minorities to participate in place. As Carolan (2020) observes in the United States, the intersection of multiple identities and their attendant politics in rural society raises complex questions about the perception of 'justice' and 'injustice'.

The framework outlined above has potential to extend the evolving study of rural spatial justice in new directions, engaging for example with the uneven geographical impacts of austerity cuts, service rationalisation, or energy price rises in rural areas; with the role of perceived rural–urban disparities in fuelling support for populist and disruptive politics; and with questions of justice in the repurposing of rural land to address the climate crisis. These avenues, which more explicitly engage with concepts of rights, entitlements and deservingness in justice scholarship and ideas of inter-territorial fairness in the distribution of resources and access to power, parallel developments elsewhere in geographical and sociological research that have similarly expanded the scope of spatial justice research to critical examination of EU cohesion policy (Demeterova et al., 2020; Evrard, 2022; Madanipour et al., 2022; Rivière, 2020; Weckroth & Moisio, 2020); place-based policies and wellbeing (Jones et al., 2020; Petrakos et al., 2022; Piras et al., 2022; Weck et al., 2022); migration policy (Papadopoulos & Fratsea, 2021); and national scale geographies of austerity and financial crisis (Kearns et al., 2014). It is as part of this expanded agenda that spatial justice can provide insights on the challenges currently facing rural Britain.

3 | APPLYING RURAL SPATIAL JUSTICE TO CONTEMPORARY COUNTRYSIDE CHALLENGES

In this final section I will illustrate the potential of a rural spatial justice approach by briefly considering three observations that follow from the application of a spatial justice framework to analysis of the contemporary challenges facing rural Britain. I aim to show that these observations, which represent just a fraction of the possibilities of a spatial justice approach, can provide insights that both help to recognise the social and geographical complexities of change in the countryside, and form a basis for constructing a more just future for rural communities.

1. *There are internal disparities and injustices in the geographical impact of contemporary challenges within rural Britain that are obscured by political and media discourses of a 'rural crisis'.*

It is now three decades since the concept of the 'differentiated countryside' was introduced into British rural studies by Richard Munton, Terry Marsden, Jon Murdoch and colleagues (Marsden et al., 1993; Murdoch et al., 2003). In its original formulation, the differentiated countryside elucidated the uneven power dynamics and socioeconomic constellations that shaped four 'ideal types' of space in rural Britain, from the *preserved countryside* of middle class protectionism, to the *paternalistic countryside* of historic elitism, the *clientelist countryside* dependent on state subsidies, and the *contested countryside* of inter-class and intra-class competition. The inequalities and injustices implicit in this model continue to influence the exposure of rural localities to broader disruptions and transitions, and how these are experienced within different rural communities, but modified by intervening social, economic and political dynamics and policy decisions.

The resilience of prosperous rural districts in the southeast of England to fluctuations in the economy, increasing cost of living, and the impact of austerity policies, is very different to that of remoter rural regions in northern and western England, Scotland and Wales (McAreavey, 2023). These peripheral districts are additionally more vulnerable to the effects

of Brexit on agri-food exports and especially to post-Brexit reforms to agricultural policy and subsidies. Such variations are belied by discourses of 'rural crisis' and singular talk of 'rural recovery'.

The COVID-19 pandemic shone light on issues of housing affordability and availability in rural Britain, notably through arguably naïve projections of a 'rural recovery' driven by post-pandemic urban to rural migration facilitated by remote working. The narrative framing of these projections recalled the 'rural crisis discourse' described by da Silva et al. (2016), in which the rural is positioned as a lagging region in need of stimulation by urban investment, while the apparent lack of consideration given to likely consequences of house price inflation, gentrification and the displacement of established rural residents became a cause of grievance in some rural communities. Furthermore, post-COVID pressures on rural housing markets are entangled with long-standing fissures, some of which reflect Marsden et al.'s (1993) differentiated countryside, and which mean that questions of inequalities and injustice are framed differently in different localities (see also Phillips et al., 2021). In the 'preserved countryside', anti-development activism has deliberately suppressed housing expansion for decades, maintaining an exclusive 'middle class countryside' (Murdoch et al., 2003; Murdoch & Marsden, 1994), but the focus of more recent campaigning and publicity has been on more peripheral coastal areas, where the major pressure is perceived to come from sales of property as second homes or holiday lets. For example, over a quarter of residential property sales in rural counties of Wales between April 2019 and March 2020 were as second homes, rising to 37.5% in Gwynedd (Woods et al., 2021). Gwynedd also recorded a 915% increase in whole property lets listed on Airbnb between 2017 and 2019 (ibid.). Activism in these areas has targeted the perceived financial bias against lower-income local residents in a largely unregulated property market by calling for restrictions on conversions to second homes or holiday lets, and surcharges on council tax charges. In yet other smaller and often remote rural communities, perceived injustices in housing revolve more around out-migration than in-migration, with people seen to be compelled to leave by stasis in housing markets and strict planning controls on new builds, which are often regarded as unfair to small communities (ibid.).

Housing also highlights the dimension of rural spatial justice as the 'right to the rural', to paraphrase Lefebvre's 'right to the city'. Housing affordability ratios in which median house prices in rural areas of the UK are typically 6–10 times median household earnings (at least) have the consequence of limiting the capacity of lower-income residents from fully investing and participating in the life of the community, and may exclude them entirely if they are forced to move elsewhere to find an affordable property. As one expression of this, nearly half (48%) of young people surveyed in rural Wales in summer 2021 said that they thought that they would need to move from their home area to find suitable housing, increasing to over 60% in Pembrokeshire (Woods & Utz, 2022).[1] Although 4 in 10 of the surveyed youth anticipated moving out of Wales entirely, housing-related migration can be more localised as differentials in property prices and availability can vary significantly between villages and small towns, creating local geographies of unevenness in the capacity of people from diverse backgrounds to reside in and form ties of belonging to different communities.

2. *The capacity of rural communities to respond to challenges is uneven and has been eroded by recent socioeconomic pressures and policy decisions.*

Spatial injustice is perceived in rural areas not only through the uneven geographical expression or impact of social-economic processes and political decisions, nor the effects of these pressures on compromising the 'right to the rural' of individuals, but also in relation to the capacity of rural communities to respond to challenges. The differential capacity of rural communities to mobilise, access funding and implement projects is well established (Woods et al., 2005), with affluent communities, especially those able to tap into the professional skill sets of middle class residents, being advantaged. Accordingly, grant funding for rural development or community projects distributed through competitive mechanisms, including National Lottery funds, does not necessarily reflect the geography of need, but may be concentrated in communities with active citizens experienced in grant-writing and attuned to the right language and accounting and technical competences. These differences in capacity have become increasingly significant as neoliberal policies have pushed more responsibility on to community-led voluntary action while at the same time scaling back state support for public services that had provided important infrastructure in rural communities.

There is no clear rural–urban division in the reduction of public spending under austerity policies, but several rural local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales experienced cuts in public services budgets of more than 20% between 2010 and 2017 (Gray & Barford, 2018). Furthermore, in many rural communities, such cuts have meant not a reduction in service but the complete removal of services or facilities. Over 40% of school closures in England between 2010 and 2019 were rural schools, affecting nearly a hundred villages (Schools Week, 2019), while the number of schools in rural counties in Wales decreased by 21% over the same period (Woods et al., 2021). Small towns and rural communities have

also commonly experienced closures or reductions in service for libraries, healthcare and leisure facilities. The trend has been compounded by parallel closures of commercial facilities in small towns and villages, including banks, post offices, filling stations and pubs (Rural England, 2022; Woods et al., 2021).

In some cases, volunteer community groups have stepped in to replace lost public or commercial services, including establishing community libraries or community-owned pubs. Town, parish and community councils have taken over assets discarded by principal local authorities, actively encouraged in England by the Localism Act 2011. However, rationalisation of such services not only accentuates inequalities in access to public services between rural and more urban localities, but also indirectly erodes the foundations of social capital and the infrastructure for collective action in rural communities. Schools, libraries and pubs often provide meeting spaces for rural communities, act as focal points for organisational activity, or simply are sites at which people meet and interact, building up social capital. In the absence of the more developed civic society institutions of larger towns and cities, these spaces are important to the capacities of rural communities to act. This 'soft infrastructure' of rural communities has been incrementally dismantled by austerity policies, and community-run groups and facilities have encountered further pressures from loss of income and attrition of volunteers during the COVID-19 pandemic (Rural England, 2022), as well as from escalating electricity and heating bills.

A 'just' rural recovery might therefore be expected to rebuild and enhance community capacities to act, recover lost community spaces, and address inequalities in the competences of different communities. Yet, efforts to support bottom-up rural community development have been frustrated by the consequences of Brexit. Community capacity-building was an important part of the EU's rural programme for Community Led Local Development (CLLD), delivered primarily through LEADER (Heron, 2023). LEADER provided grant-funding for small-scale community projects and 'soft infrastructure', nurtured community confidence, and trained and employed an extensive cohort of professionals working with rural communities. However, rural community development has been squeezed in post-Brexit policy reforms by the twin emphasises on sustainable land management on the one hand and integrated regional development on the other. Although the Scottish Government has continued funding for former LEADER Local Action Groups, no replacement schemes for LEADER have yet been introduced in England or Wales, creating a cliff-edge in funding and dissipating accumulated expertise.

3. *We need an open discussion about what spatial justice looks like for the countryside of the future.*

Spatial justice invites a future-focused perspective. As a normative concept, spatial justice can set out a model for fair social and political relations and inform policy decisions around pathways to achieve the vision. The notion of a rural recovery implies a forward momentum, but as noted earlier, the language of 'recovery' also suggests a return to a previous state, such that the future is approached through reference to the past and the overcoming of a current disruption. Indeed, debates around rural development policy in Britain tend to be framed in terms of recovering from the crisis of COVID, or the disruption of Brexit, or longer-term trends of social and economic restructuring. Relatively little attention is devoted to anticipating future disruptions. Some aspects of rural policy planning have started to engage with the challenge of climate change and the post-carbon transition, notably in terms of the potential for green technology and new rural land uses—but the social, cultural and political implications of such developments are less thoroughly acknowledged (Phillips & Dickie, 2019). The ramifications of other 'mega-trends' are even more neglected, including the growth of plant-based diets and prospect of lab-cultured meat alternatives that could fundamentally change livestock farming and the landscapes and cultural practices associated with it (Sexton et al., 2022); or the projected decrease in the population of Europe, which could intensify demographic ageing and undermine the viability of smaller rural communities.

Each of these trends is likely to raise questions about rural spatial justice: about the geographical distribution of scarce resources; about exposure to environmental and economic harm; about fairness in the repurposing of land use; and about who gets to make these momentous decisions. Fundamentally, the 'right to the rural', especially the 'right' of rurigeneous people to live, work and perpetuate traditional cultures in rural places, may be compromised, potentially as a result of decisions made in cities. Yet, equally there is no definitive blueprint for managing future challenges in a spatially just way. If spatial justice is understood as material and economic equality, then achieving spatial justice requires redistribution of resources in a centralised polity, with localised decision-making constrained in ways that may be viewed as unjust, and the interests of some rural communities sacrificed for the 'greater good'. Conversely, if spatial justice is understood as the capacity of a community to shape its own future, defensive rural localism and opposition to, for example, wind turbines, solar farms or carbon forestry might obstruct efforts to mitigate societal challenges and reproduce social and spatial inequalities elsewhere.

These choices have been encoded in scenarios for spatial justice in Europe in 2050 developed by IMAJINE (IMAJINE, 2021), representing different balances between solidarity and autonomy in policy-making, and between prioritising economic growth and an emphasis on wider social and environmental wellbeing.[2] Although formulated at an EU scale, the scenarios may equally be applied to rural Britain. In the first scenario, *Silver Citadel*, the pursuit of even economic growth is achieved through top-down state direction, reducing rural poverty but in other ways marginalising rural voices as new housing and industrial developments, renewable energy schemes or reservoirs are imposed against local opposition. The second scenario, *Green Guardian*, envisages a radical shift in societal priorities in the context of climate change, as spatial justice is reimagined as regions helping each other to adapt, mediated by strong top-down government. In this scenario, some rural areas become magnets for renewed counter-urban migration from unsustainable cities, prompting economic revival but at the price of gentrification. Other rural regions encounter the policy-driven liquidation of farming as land is repurposed for energy, water supply, forestry or carbon sequestration, with cultural loss and displacement of people.

In the third scenario, *Silicon Scaffold*, the EU and UK as political entities have been eroded by prosperous regions pursuing autonomy to hold on to the wealth that they have generated. As inter-regional redistribution fails, public services and infrastructure become increasingly dependent on transnational corporations who sponsor thriving city-states, or in rural regions provide investment in return for exclusive access to agricultural produce or natural resources. The final scenario, *Patchwork Rainbow*, envisages fragmentation driven by cultural fissures, with spatial justice perceived as the right of a community to set its own values. In this future, some rural areas become foci of sustainable, low-carbon experiments, whilst others exert exclusionary values and restrict new developments. Without the safety net of the welfare state or rural development programmes, yet other rural areas spiral into decline and depopulation, extenuating spatial inequalities.

These are all deliberately extreme scenarios and the future of the British countryside is likely to lie somewhere in between these poles. Nonetheless, all are based on extrapolating trends currently observable in Europe that need to be taken seriously. Yet, there is arguably a collective failure of imagination in thinking about the British countryside. Technocratic responses to societal challenges plot new land uses as if the countryside is a blank canvas, paying little heed to the economic, social and emotional investments of existing rural residents. Rural activism, in turn, is too frequently drenched in nostalgia and fixated on protecting the status quo, with a reluctance to even countenance the challenges of the post-carbon transition, population decline, or dietary shifts and agri-food innovations. In a survey of rural stakeholders in Wales in 2020, only a minority thought that lab-cultured meat alternatives, new automated technologies, and new biotechnological solutions for addressing food security and climate change were either likely to happen or would have a significant impact (Woods et al., 2021).[3]

4 | CONCLUSION

Plotting a pathway for rural communities in Britain that both responds to current challenges and anticipates future disruptions therefore requires engaging with difficult questions about the fairness of uneven geographical impacts and the capacity of communities to shape their own futures. A spatial justice framework can help to inform this process, pointing to the power dynamics that underpin patterns of inequality, recognising the multidimensional nature of spatial justice and thus multiple views on what aspects of spatial justice should be prioritised, and allowing normative visions for a fairer rural society to be articulated and debated.

Employing a spatial justice framework may further raise questions about how we do rural research and the data and methods that we use. Shifting language from inequality to injustice adds qualitative dimensions to understanding quantitative disparities and calls for mixed methods research. Moreover, critical reflection on our part as researchers in reproducing or challenging injustice, and foregrounding the right of communities to shape their own futures, both point to the need for co-design and co-creation, community-led research and participatory action research, as well as deliberative and dialogue methods, in building the knowledge and understanding required to foster emancipatory responses to crises in the British countryside.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to colleagues on the IMAJINE and ROBUST projects, including Jesse Heley, Bryonny Goodwin-Hawkins, Helen Howells, Rhys Jones, Marie Mahon and Matt Finch for their contributions to work discussed here.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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ENDNOTES

[1] An online survey was conducted between July and September 2021 with participants recruited through a social media campaign targeting young people aged between 16 and 25 in the nine predominantly rural local authorities of Wales. A total of 1065 valid survey returns were received and analysed.

[2] The scenarios were developed through an iterative process with a working group of researchers constructing initial scenarios informed by IMAJINE project findings and data, testing with key organisations, workshops with national and regional stakeholders, and independent experts, and subsequent refinement (see IMAJINE, 2021).

[3] The online survey was completed by 60 stakeholders in rural Wales as an alternative to a workshop during COVID restrictions. Respondents were asked to complete Likert scale questions on the likelihood of several potential trends and their probable impact on rural Wales (see Woods et al., 2021).

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How to cite this article: Woods, M. (2023) Rural recovery or rural spatial justice? Responding to multiple crises for the British countryside. *The Geographical Journal*, 00, 1–10. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1111/geoj.12541