

# Analyzing Social Disadvantage in Rural Peripheries in Czechia and Eastern Germany

Conceptual Model and Study Design

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The project 'Social disadvantage in rural peripheries in Czechia and eastern Germany: opportunity structures and individual agency in a comparative perspective' runs from 2018 to 2021. It is a cooperation project of the Thünen Institute of Rural Studies (Braunschweig, Germany) and the Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences (Prague, Czechia). It is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG; Project Number: 391073923) and the Czech Science Foundation (GAČR; Contract ID: 18-05704J).

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## Abstract

The aim of this Working Paper is to introduce a conceptual model and study design for researching social disadvantage in rural peripheries, focusing on the interplay of social disadvantage and spatial disadvantage. The paper presents the theoretical concepts, understandings, and definitions, as well as the research design we draw on in the international research project 'Social disadvantage in rural peripheries in Czechia and eastern Germany: opportunity structures and individual agency in a comparative perspective.'

The project investigates the multifaceted relationships between social disadvantage, local and regional opportunity structures, and individual agency in rural peripheries in Czechia and eastern Germany from a comparative perspective. It focuses on two sets of research questions. The first set concerns the quantitative patterns of social disadvantage and spatial disadvantage in rural areas. The second set asks about the impact of opportunity structures as part of the residential context on particularly disadvantaged groups in four case study regions. The project applies theories of peripheralization and rural restructuring, and considers social networks and individual agency. Area-level secondary data and accessibility analyses and qualitative case studies, including ego-centered network analyses and GPS mapping of time-space activity patterns, are used.

**Keywords:** Social disadvantage; peripheralization; rural areas; rural peripheries; rural restructuring; opportunity structure; social networks; agency



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## 1 Introduction

Rural regions have recently attracted more attention in the political and public discourse, both in Europe and elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Narratives of a growing urban-rural divide and of places (and people) that are ‘left behind’ have emerged, and have found a critical echo in scholarly debates (e.g., McKay, 2019; Ulrich-Schad and Duncan, 2018). Peripheral rural areas are said to be particularly affected by multiple forms of social disadvantage and spatial disadvantage, including a lack of public and private services, a weak economic base, poor accessibility, and detrimental demographic changes. Among these demographic changes are the outmigration of younger and more skilled people, subsequent population decline, and population aging (Commins, 2004). Of course, the structural problems of rural peripheries are not new, and have been discussed in regional and rural studies for quite a while. However, the questions of *how these structural problems interact with social inequalities* and *what peripheralization processes mean to disadvantaged social groups* living in these areas have not yet been sufficiently tackled by empirical studies. Moreover, only a few theoretical contributions have established convincing links between spatial disadvantage and social disadvantage at different scales. It is in particular the interplay of macro processes and micro behavior that is the starting point of the Czech-German research project ‘Social disadvantage in rural peripheries in Czechia and eastern Germany: opportunity structures and individual agency in a comparative perspective’ (2018-2021). When we refer to rural peripheries in this project, we do not mean a fixed, clearly delineated ‘container space’; but instead apply a processual understanding to these areas (for more detail, see Chapter 3.1). Certainly, rural areas may undergo different processes, and opposite processes of de-peripheralization can also occur (Steinführer et al., 2016).

This Working Paper introduces a theoretical framework for analyzing the relationships between social disadvantage and spatial disadvantage, and demonstrates a study design for implementing these theoretical ideas. Chapter 2 presents the rationale for this research focus, as well as the specific aims of the Czech-German comparison. In Chapter 3, deeper insights into major concepts and theoretical reasoning are provided. The problem statement starts with the processes that are currently being discussed in rural studies as potential drivers of spatially differentiated developments and forms of spatial inequality: rural restructuring and peripheralization. We then introduce the concepts of social disadvantage and spatial disadvantage. We also pay attention to the role of local and regional opportunity structures as mediating factors between the macro processes and the individual lives of inhabitants of rural peripheries. On the micro level, we focus on socially disadvantaged groups and their agency, and consider their social networks as another mediating meso level. Chapter 4 brings these debates together by visualizing the theoretical framework. The theoretical considerations are

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Ehrenstein (2016), ‘Zukunftsfragen entscheiden sich auf dem Lande’, Welt online, November 15, 2016; Noack (2016), ‘The urban-rural divide that bolstered Trump isn’t just an American thing; it’s prevalent in Europe, too’, The Washington Post, November 27, 2016; Blicke et al. (2019) ‘The New Colors of Europe’, DIE ZEIT, July 2, 2019.

complemented by a research design that allows for the analysis of social disadvantage in rural peripheries in Chapter 5. Finally, Chapter 6 provides a summary and an outlook that explains further developments in the research setting.

## 2 Researching social disadvantage in rural peripheries: rationale and aims

The structural problems of rural peripheries have been discussed in regional and rural studies for a number of decades (e.g., Copus, 2001; Lamprianidēs, 2004). This is also the case for the topics of social disadvantage and rural poverty (e.g., Shucksmith, 2012). However, the questions of *how structural problems interact with social inequalities* and *what peripheralization processes mean to disadvantaged social groups* living in these areas have not yet been sufficiently tackled by empirical studies. Our comparative research therefore has the following aims:

- a) exploring patterns of social disadvantage and spatial disadvantage in rural Czechia and eastern Germany on a structural macro level;
- b) analyzing how rural residents perceive and deal with these structural disadvantages on an individual micro level;
- c) examining how the meso level of social networks (e.g., of kin and friends) mediate these disadvantages; and
- d) investigating in an explorative way whether and, if so, how economic dynamics in peripheral(ized) regions (e.g., new industrial or tourist investments) can transform existing patterns of social disadvantage and spatial disadvantage.

### 2.1 Why conduct research on rural peripheries?

The term ‘periphery’ either refers to a location (being at the edge of something, and, thus, at a certain distance from a center) or is used within a functional context (something that only becomes meaningful in reference to a center or core; or something that is excluded from existing networks or holds a subordinate position). From either perspective, the term is rarely used in a neutral sense, but instead has connotations of backwardness and underdevelopment (in more detail and with further references: Steinführer et al., 2016: pp. 2-8; Kühn, 2015). The core or center is conceptualized as a hub connecting a variety of nodes in a network of economic, transportation, and symbolic interactions; power relations; and material and financial flows. The periphery, by contrast, is seen as having only a few connections. From this perspective, the periphery and the center are complementary spatial categories with a dialectical relationship to each other (Heintel, 1998: p. 17).

The center-periphery distinction is of primary importance for rural areas, as from the perspective of the center, rural areas are systematically located on the periphery. However, even within rural areas, there are differences between more central places and areas with locational disadvantages. Thus, rural peripheries are peripheral in a multiple senses: i.e., they are distant from the centers of economic, political, and symbolic power spatially, psychologically, and in

terms of influence. Moreover, within rural areas, peripheries are characterized by relatively poor accessibility and more severe disadvantages. For people living in rural peripheries, mobility is essential to participation in society (Osti, 2010).

The rural peripheries that are the major focus of our research have been described in terms of six dimensions: distance (referring to poor accessibility); disconnectedness (in terms of being excluded from global economic networks); (relative) deprivation (relating to subjective perceptions of living in a peripheral region); dependency (on external decisions and funding); difference (as some peripheries cope better than others); and discourse (stigmatization that exacerbates existing disadvantages) (similarly Steinführer et al., 2016: pp. 7-9; advancing Ferrão and Lopes, 2004).

Up to now, scholars have devoted little attention to the question of how spatial disadvantage in rural peripheries affects the daily lives of individual inhabitants, and of what coping mechanisms these inhabitants use to deal with these constraints. Moreover, previous research has failed to adequately consider the residential context of rural peripheries as a setting that produces and reinforces distinct forms of social disadvantage (for exceptions, see, e.g., Bernard and Šafr, 2019; Bernard et al., 2016; Klärner et al., 2015; Kreher, 2012; Nagy et al., 2015; Steinführer and Küpper, 2013; Temelová et al., 2011). This gap in the literature is particularly striking given the extensive research on intra-urban residential segregation. Indeed, investigations into neighborhood effects in urban areas – that is, research into how the structural conditions of the residential context influence the life chances of the neighborhoods' inhabitants – are well advanced (e.g., van Ham et al., 2012). Moreover, the majority of existing studies on rural peripheries have been intra-nationally focused, thus leaving space for a broader perspective that compares different countries. Our research design involves cross-national research on two post-socialist societies. This approach allows us to obtain deeper insights into how the more general mechanisms of social disadvantage are transforming rural peripheries. It also permits us to gain an understanding of how local and regional opportunity structures affect the lives of the people living in these areas. These issues are especially relevant in the post-socialist societies of Central and Eastern Europe, as the rural peripheries – along with the deindustrialized regions – in these countries are often considered to be the losers of the societal transformation after 1989/1990 in terms of their demographic development, access to well-paid jobs, and infrastructure (Bürkner, 2005; Nagy et al., 2015; PoSCoPP, 2015). However, such judgments should also take the pre-transition experiences of these areas into account, as it is clear that the peripheral rural areas and small villages in these countries were experiencing infrastructure, economic, and social disadvantages well before 1990 (Leibert, 2013; Steinführer, 2020). Brown and Schafft (2003) have argued convincingly that in both spatial and social terms, the wealth and opportunities provided by the post-socialist transition have been distributed unevenly, and have added to existing inequalities.

## 2.2 Why focus on Czechia and eastern Germany?

A comparison of the rural areas in Czechia and eastern Germany is particularly interesting because of their historical and structural similarities. For centuries, the territories of the two societies were part of the Holy Roman Empire, and they thus have similar cultural, religious, political, and economic foundations. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century onward, large parts of Bohemia, Moravia, and Saxony (along with Silesia) became the main centers of industrialization in Central Europe. After World War II, Czechoslovakia and the German Democratic Republic had higher levels of industrialization and urbanization than the other states in Central and Eastern Europe. In addition, from the early 1990s onward, both Czechia and eastern Germany experienced a radical transition in which they went from being socialist societies with central planned economies to being democratic societies with market economies. Nonetheless, up to today, legacies of socialism can still be observed in Czechia and eastern Germany. For example, in the rural areas of these countries, these legacies are apparent in the prevalence of large farms, rather than of family farming, which has resulted in specific land use patterns. Moreover, the two societies experienced somewhat similar processes of post-socialist rural restructuring, and, in particular, a sharp decline in agricultural employment (Gorlach, 2006; Laschewski, 2009; Šimon and Bernard, 2016). In addition, since Czechia joined the European Union in 2004, the rural areas in both countries have been exposed to the institutional framework of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), including its instruments and funding to support not only agriculture, but rural development in general. We expect that this common framework is having similar effects on the rural regions in the two societies (Heindl and Steinführer, 2020).

Despite their common legacies, the political developments, economic processes, and migration patterns in eastern Germany in the post-socialist period differed from those in Czechia. Because there was an almost complete transfer of western German institutions and rules to eastern Germany throughout the 1990s, eastern Germany always represented a specific case of the post-socialist transition. This process was accompanied by enormous and sudden losses in industrial, administrative, and agricultural jobs; high unemployment rates; and high rates of outmigration, especially of younger and better educated people (and, among them, more women than men; Leibert, 2016). Most of these outmigrants headed to western Germany. However, until today, significant economic, social and political differences remain between the western and the eastern parts of the country, and additional differences have emerged in recent decades as unintended consequences of reunification (for a general assessment of regional development in eastern Germany after 1990, see Becker and Naumann, 2020). Indeed, the term ‘peripheralization’ was initially developed in reference to rural areas in eastern Germany (see Chapter 3.1). Parts of urban and rural regions in Czechia were also negatively affected by job losses during the transition period, and spatial concentrations of poverty and unemployment have emerged in recent decades. However, unlike in eastern Germany, the economic decline in Czechia was, in general, not accompanied by high rates of rural outmigration and depopulation. On the contrary: during the 1990s and 2000s, a distinctive suburbanization process had strong effects not only on the fringes of the large urban centers, but also on semi-rural and rural areas,

and resulted in population growth in large parts of the Czech countryside (Ouředníček et al., 2019). In addition to their diverging migration patterns, a further major difference between the rural areas in Czechia and eastern Germany is in their administrative structures: in Czechia, rural areas are made up of a large number of small municipalities; whereas in eastern Germany, the municipal units are generally much bigger, with administrative and social services being increasingly concentrated in small town centers (Lešková and Vaishar, 2019; Steinführer, 2018).

Czechia and eastern Germany are interesting to compare not only because of their common experience of having been affected by the collapse of socialism; but also because of they face similar challenges today, including economic processes such as deindustrialization, (some degree of) re-industrialization, tertiarization, and globalization. Moreover, both countries are experiencing a restructuring of the welfare state and processes of trans-nationalization and European integration. The demographic changes in both countries raise similar issues, such as the aging of the population and shortages of skilled workers. Among the similar developments in the rural areas of the two countries are growing concerns about declines in basic public and private services, the concentration of such services in urban centers, and a lack of accessibility and mobility. In addition, according to a cluster analysis that compared the member states of the European Union, Czechia and Germany currently have similar profiles in terms of poverty and social exclusion. Both countries are grouped within the first of five clusters, which is characterized by low risks of poverty and of social exclusion (Lobata and Kaup, 2014). All of these issues also represent challenges to the broader political and social agenda (Beetz et al., 2008; Bernard, 2018). In Germany, achieving so-called equivalent living conditions (*gleichwertige Lebensverhältnisse*) in all regions has become a prominent political goal, and a topic of recurring public debates (e.g., ARL, 2006, 2020; Steinführer et al., 2020). This issue has also been addressed by the Czech public administration, “claiming that rural areas do not offer living conditions comparable to cities, suffer from a limited ‘viability’ and therefore lose population” (Bernard, 2018: p. 192, with reference to the Czech Ministry of Agriculture). These debates need to be seen within the broader framework of spatial justice discourses related to the unequal spatiality of resource availability and accessibility (Israel and Frenkel, 2018; Soja, 2010).

### 3 Researching social disadvantage and spatial disadvantage: main conceptual strands

The individual concepts to which our research interest relates are addressed in specialized – and, to a large extent, separate – research strands in rural and urban studies, regional sciences, sociology, and geography. It is neither possible nor desirable to recapitulate these respective scholarly debates. Rather, we will briefly summarize each of the concepts within the framework of our research objectives (as outlined in Chapter 2). We will consider both the international discourse, as well as specific scientific accounts from Czechia and Germany.

#### 3.1 Rural restructuring and peripheralization: drivers of spatial inequality under the conditions of the post-socialist transition

In recent decades, ‘rural restructuring’ has become a widely used term in rural studies (e.g., Csurgó et al., 2018; Hedlund and Lundholm, 2015; Hoggart and Paniagua, 2001; Woods, 2005). As such, it is a broad and, at the same time, fuzzy umbrella term that refers to the interplay of a variety of changes in rural areas. Broadly speaking, ‘rural restructuring’ can be looked at from two main angles: i.e., as a concept that focuses on the far-reaching sectoral changes relating to the diminishing and transformative role of agriculture in western societies; or as a concept that emerges from a territorial perspective on rural areas as spaces of life, work, culture, etc. When applying an agricultural perspective, the long-term decline of the importance of farming as a primary sector in the national economies of the Global North, the rationalization of agricultural practices, and the transformation from the ‘production’ to the ‘consumption’ countryside, come to the fore. By contrast, as a space-related term, ‘rural restructuring’ focuses on the interplay of multidimensional economic, social, and technological changes in globalized societies, as well as their (specific) outcomes for rural areas, and their effects on the differentiation of economic, regulatory, and social conditions (Hoggart and Paniagua, 2001; Marsden, 1999; Marsden et al., 1990).

Rural restructuring is also used to describe the far-reaching transformations of agriculture and rural societies within the post-socialist context. Here, the term refers more specifically to the changes in the agricultural sector in terms of property structures and land use, market liberalization, technical progress, and rationalization and the related mass dismissal of labor; as well as to the institutional, demographics and social changes in rural areas (and in entire societies) in the decades that followed the political transition in 1989/1990 (e.g., Csurgó et al., 2018; Laschewski, 2009).

Relatively independent of that debate, the concept of ‘peripheralization’ was developed in the German scholarly discourse in the early 2000s. Starting from the notion of (rural) peripheries as areas where structural disadvantages are intertwined with geographical location, a dynamic perspective on this spatial category was introduced. Thus, based on a processual understanding

of the term, peripheralization can be defined as resulting from an overarching socio-spatial polarization at the regional level (Bürkner, 2005; Keim, 2006). It therefore refers to the economic, political, and symbolic decoupling of regions within the framework of broader spatial developments. The term peripheralization was coined to describe negative developments in non-metropolitan or non-central areas, originally with a particular reference to rural areas in eastern Germany. Besides having economic insufficiencies, peripheralized regions are characterized by a decline in public infrastructure and private services (mainly with regard to medical services, educational institutions, community centers, and local supply services), a lopsided dependency on economic and political centers, and a decoupling from positive impulses for development (Barlösius and Neu, 2008; Beetz et al., 2008). With regard to demographic developments, peripheralization is strongly intertwined with age and socially selective outmigration, and, in the short and medium term, with significant levels of population decline and aging (Leibert, 2016; Steinführer et al., 2014). A particular focus of the debate on peripheralization is on its symbolic dimension: i.e., the term refers not only to the 'hard' infrastructure and deficits in economic development that reinforce peripheralization processes, but also to the representations of such regions in the media, and in political and scientific debates (Bürk, 2013; Willett, 2020). This perspective allows us to link the peripheralization debate to more general questions regarding the social construction and reproduction of space; and, thus, to issues of economic, political, and symbolic power relations and class struggles (Bourdieu, 1992a, 1992b; Shucksmith, 2012).

Rural restructuring and peripheralization are both concepts that point to the social and spatial effects of broader macroeconomic and societal processes (e.g., deindustrialization, tertiarization, globalization, restructuring of the welfare state, post-socialist transitions, transnationalization, European integration, demographic changes). Our interest here lies in examining how rural restructuring and peripheralization affect spatial inequalities and their social effects: Who profits from economic and social changes, and who does not? Both concepts deal with the (re)production of spatial inequalities resulting from developments on the macro level: while urban and rural areas and metropolitan and non-metropolitan regions are affected differently by these developments, rural areas are also diversifying. There are 'winners' and 'losers' – that is, while some regions are able to profit from economic and societal changes, other regions are in weaker and more spatially disadvantaged situations in terms of the various dimensions discussed above (Schmied, 2005). We call these regions rural peripheries. As outlined above, the process of peripheralization amplifies and, in many cases, perpetuates existing forms of spatial disadvantage. It is also a result of political decisions and the allocation and redistribution of resources and power among regions, centers, and peripheries as part of a broader process of rearranging and reorganizing (western) welfare states.

Some efforts have been made to link peripheralization explicitly to established theories of polarization, dependency, uneven development, and territorial justice (e.g., Fischer-Tahir and Naumann, 2013; Lang, 2012). The scholarly debate has stressed the economic dependency of peripheries in terms of the division of labor and global value chains. Hence, as well as being



dependent on metropolitan areas, peripheries are considered to have a dependent and subordinate position in globalized economies. Not least, the ascriptions and discourse-related aspects of peripheries are deemed very important – both as ascriptions from the outside, and as ‘mental lock-ins’ (Lang, 2012: p. 1751; Meyer and Miggelbrink, 2013).

## 3.2 Social disadvantage

The concept of ‘social disadvantage’ is applied to individuals or households who are not able to lead their lives in ways that are available to the majority of the population, and who thus cannot fully participate in society (Shucksmith et al., 1996). In many cases, social disadvantage has been described in very vague and general terms; e.g., “limited or denied access to worthwhile social goods or social positions” (Böhnisch and Schröer, 2004). The strength of this concept is, however, that it is multidimensional, and relates not only to a lack of income, but also to a shortage of material, cultural, and social resources (Shucksmith et al., 1996). In addition, it relates to a condition, as well as to the processes through which relative advantages or disadvantages are conferred or attained (Platt and Dean, 2016).

The concept of social disadvantage has an objective and a subjective side. Objectively, it measures whether a person differs in his or her resource endowment from the majority of the population. Interestingly, however, this measure does not necessarily need to coincide with an individual’s subjective perception of feeling deprived or worse-off (Kreckel, 1992). This issue becomes even more complex with the observation that what some people consider to be indispensable (e.g., having a car), may not be necessary for others (Dean, 2016). Subjective feelings of being disadvantaged (or ‘left behind’; Ulrich-Schad and Duncan, 2018) do not necessarily need to correspond to objective measures of social inequality (Townsend, 1987). Another reason for the vagueness of the term is that the dimensions of social disadvantage may differ according to the research interest, the subject under scrutiny, the societal context, and the place and time.

The concept enables the linkage of different levels of observation: i.e., social structural phenomena on the macro level of social inequalities can be linked with individual agency (and coping) on the micro level (see Chapter 5.1). Thus, social disadvantage is not purely an individual fate, but is rather the outcome of social and economic processes and political decisions (Kersten et al., 2012). In addition, the concept draws attention to the question of how individuals perceive and deal with these processes; e.g., what social resources they can mobilize to cope with disadvantageous living conditions (Böhnisch and Schröer, 2004; Klärner and Knabe, 2019; Steinführer et al., 2014). Along these lines, Reimer (2004) reformulated and modernized Polanyi’s (1944) ‘modes of economic integration,’ arguing that processes of (as he terms it) social exclusion operate through four social systems: market relations (e.g., on the labor market), bureaucratic relations (e.g., state institutions), communal relations (e.g., family and friends, based on shared identity), and associative relations (e.g., clubs and organizations of shared

interests). These modes link individuals' interactions on the micro level with developments on the societal macro level: e.g., economic crises may affect the structures of the labor market; public reforms may influence how state institutions work; and the structures of these systems may influence not only the distribution of resources, but also the individual's capacity to act.

The concept of 'social disadvantage' is often used interchangeably with other concepts, such as social deprivation, social exclusion, or vulnerability. These concepts are also defined in very similar ways, and sometimes differ only in specific nuances. However, they are rooted in rather distinct disciplines and research strands. As we cannot recapitulate and discuss in detail the formation, development, and usage of these concepts in this Working Paper, we will elaborate on why we prefer to use the concept of social disadvantage in our current research, rather than the concepts of social deprivation, social exclusion, or social vulnerability.

When it comes to operationalizing the concept of social disadvantage, lists of different fields of disadvantage are very similar to the wide range of existing deprivation indicators and indexes. Table 1 presents the dimensions of social disadvantage, as conceptualized by Headey (2006: pp. 18, 19); and directly compares them to the dimensions of three different indexes of deprivation (for further examples from the deprivation literature, see Burke and Jones, 2018; Havard et al., 2008; Kroll et al., 2017; Maier and Schwettmann, 2018; Midgley et al., 2003; Noble et al., 2006; Ribeiro et al., 2018).

**Table 1: Dimensions of social disadvantage and deprivation**

<b>Dimensions of social disadvantage (Headey 2006)</b>	<b>Northern Ireland Measures of Multiple Deprivation 2001 (Noble et al. 2001)</b>	<b>English Index of Deprivation 2004 (Noble et al. 2004)</b>	<b>German Index of Multiple Deprivation 2017 (Maier 2017)</b>
Financial capital and functioning, financial satisfaction	Income	Income	Income
Employment and labour market functioning, employment outcomes and job satisfaction	Employment	Employment	Employment
Health capital and functioning, health outcomes and satisfaction	Health deprivation and disability	Health and disability	**
Human capital	Education, skills and training	Education, skills and training	Education, skills and training
	<i>Geographical access to services</i>	<i>Barriers to housing and services</i>	–
	Housing stress	–	–
Family and social capital and functioning, work-family stress and life satisfaction	Social environment	–	Social capital
	–	Living environment	Environment
	–	Crime	Security
	–	–	Financial situation of local governments

\* In the GIMD, health is not considered as a dimension of social deprivation because health is analyzed as a dependent variable (epidemiological research concerning place effects on health on a regional basis).

Sources: Headey, 2006; Bauer and Maier, 2018; Noble et al., 2001, 2004.

While deprivation indexes refer to social disadvantage on an area level, and therefore keep social disadvantage and spatial disadvantage (e.g., geographical access to services or living environment; Table 1) together, we have chosen to separate them in our conceptual framework. Of course, deprivation indexes also display regional opportunity structures. But by keeping social disadvantage and spatial disadvantage separate, we expect to learn more about how social and spatial factors interact with each other and what they mean to the individuals they affect. Therefore, the concept of social disadvantage seems more suitable for our purposes. Furthermore, whereas the focus of social deprivation is on outcomes, we understand social disadvantage as a processual and relational concept, without establishing an absolute threshold for when disadvantage begins. Thus, the concept of social disadvantage is a better fit given our interest in the subjective perception of being worse-off than others, which is constantly produced, reproduced, or changed in social interactions.

Another related concept is social exclusion. Like social disadvantage, it refers to restrictions in options for multidimensional societal participation and integration. Social exclusion is – in

contrast to social deprivation – explicitly understood as a concept that highlights processes by which conditions of disadvantage come about (Bernard et al., 2019; Commins, 2004; Philip and Shucksmith, 2003). However, the term social exclusion has been criticized for its focus on a rather narrow social group, and for implying that all but a small number of individuals are included in a cohesive society (Shucksmith, 2012). Using the concept of social disadvantage avoids this narrow focus, as it is based on the idea that individuals from any social group may experience some form of social inequality.

In linking the ability of individuals to cope with disadvantageous circumstances, the concept of social disadvantage is very similar to that of social vulnerability, which is often used in research on health or disasters, and refers not only to biological frailties, but to social circumstances. Vulnerability has both an external side (of exposure) and an internal side (of coping) (Chambers, 1989: p. 1). Exposure can be understood not only as exposure to certain shocks or hazards, but also to the specific material and symbolic structures of residential environments. Coping (or adaptive) capacity relates to the classical socio-structural characteristics of individuals and social groups, such as disposable income or economic capital, educational background or cultural capital, and social networks or social capital; which indicates that vulnerability is a specific concept of social inequality (Decker, 2019; Knabe et al., 2018; Steinführer and Kuhlicke, 2012). Given our interest in researching the interactions of social and spatial processes, social disadvantage, as counterpart to spatial disadvantage, is the more applicable concept for our research aims.

When looking at social disadvantage from a spatial perspective, it becomes clear that social disadvantage is distributed unevenly in space, which results in the existence of spatial clusters of increased disadvantage. Some aspects of social disadvantage are explicitly linked to spatial factors (Lee, 2016). Thus, scholars sometimes refer to socio-spatial or spatial disadvantage (see also the next chapter). In rural studies, the concept of ‘rural disadvantage’ includes aspects like “geographic isolation, discrimination, lack of empowerment, access to information and opportunities” (Dunn et al., 1998: p. 3). However, we do not consider rural disadvantage to be identical to spatial disadvantage. Instead, we are interested in the interplay of certain spatial factors, which we will explain in more detail in the subsequent chapter.

### 3.3 Spatial disadvantage

The concept of spatial disadvantage is derived from spatial inequality research. Scholars have long argued that the use of a spatial perspective provides important new insights into the forms and causes of social inequality. Since Charles Booth published his pioneering studies of poverty distribution in London (Booth, 1902), the spatial analysis of poverty and disadvantage has become one of the central topics of urban and regional studies. Social hierarchies are distributed unequally in space, creating spatial hot spots of wealth and poverty. At the same time, it has been recognized that spatial factors contribute to social polarization and the (re)production of

inequalities (Lobao et al., 2007). The term 'spatial disadvantage' has been used to capture two related, but distinct concepts. On the one hand, scholars have used it to refer to existing spatial concentrations of social disadvantage; i.e., places inhabited by disproportionate numbers of socioeconomically disadvantaged people (e.g., Sharkey, 2014). On the other hand, spatial disadvantage can refer to the spatial mechanisms that contribute to existing forms of social disadvantage, be it in the form of exclusion from access to transportation (Dodson et al., 2006) or housing (Acolin and Wachter, 2017); job mismatch (Raphael, 1998); or other barriers to access to resources and opportunities. These two uses of the concept clearly overlap given that housing in high poverty (i.e., spatially disadvantaged) areas has been repeatedly recognized as one of the factors that contributes to individual social disadvantage and limited upward mobility (Wilson, 1987).

In sociology, the relevance of space in relation to social inequalities was traditionally investigated within metropolitan areas with highly segregated neighborhoods, or even ghettos. Pointing to neighborhood-level factors of social disadvantage, the field of neighborhood effects research was established in the 1980s with the aim of identifying the mechanisms through which the immediate residential context affects the social situations of its inhabitants. In his classic essay, 'The truly disadvantaged,' Wilson (1987) searched for the causes of the worsening economic and social conditions in the ghettoized neighborhoods of U.S. cities. Wilson suggested that the rise of unemployment and the social problems associated with it were a consequence not only of cultural effects, but of changing labor markets, which resulted in the disappearance of job opportunities from the inner cities. He argued that due to their high levels of isolation, a so-called 'culture of poverty' was spreading in the marginalized neighborhoods of the ghetto, and was affecting the adolescent inhabitants, discouraging them from achieving educational and work-related success. Later, mechanisms of neighborhood effects were classified by Galster (2012) into four groups:

- (1) Social-interactive mechanisms involve the communication of information, forms of behavior, and the social norms that exist among the inhabitants of the same neighborhood; and they also reflect the degree of social control and cohesion among the inhabitants.
- (2) Environmental mechanisms operate directly through the residential environment with which the inhabitants are in regular contact. These mechanisms also include the level of violence in the neighborhood, the form of the physical environment, and the amount of pollution.
- (3) Geographical mechanisms relate to the spatial access of the inhabitants of a given neighborhood to various types of services and employment, and to the quality of the available services.
- (4) Institutional mechanisms relate to the functioning of institutions that are located outside of a given neighborhood, but that have control over various resources, and that influence the inhabitants' access to housing, services, and employment. These mechanisms may

allocate resources and opportunities in unequal ways. Thus, for residents in some problem neighborhoods, their access to various resources for may be negatively affected because they are stigmatized based on their place of residence.

Recently, Sharkey and Faber (2014) proposed shifting the focus of the neighborhood effect literature away from a concentration on proving whether neighborhoods matter, and toward investigating in a broader setting how different dimensions of individuals' residential contexts become salient in their lives. They called for a nuanced elaboration of the contextual mechanisms that operate at different spatial levels; noting that broader spatial settings, as well as the immediate environment of a neighborhood, can have important effects on the socioeconomic outcomes of individuals. This argument made by Sharkey and Faber is in line with a previous attempt by Linda Lobao to establish the sociology of spatial inequality by seeking to answer the question of how the existing spatial patterns of inequalities were formed. In addition, this research strand has raised the question of how geographical space contributes to the formation of inequalities across different areas and on different spatial scales (Lobao et al., 2007). Focusing on larger regions, Lobao and Hooks (2007) have proposed their own classification of the factors that contribute the spatial differentiation of social inequalities. The first factor is the economic structure of regions. Different economic sectors and different types of employment yield different levels of economic growth, and they also vary in terms of the distribution of their profits, and in the degree to which employees, or even the region itself, benefit from them. The second factor refers to the institutional structures that are established between a region's key actors, which include public administrators, employers, employees, and civil society, as well as regional public policy measures. The third factor, according to Lobao, is where regions are positioned within national and global political and economic contexts, which can determine their options for obtaining various types of subsidies; but also in relation to the global economic forces that are transforming regional economies. The fourth factor refers to the historical processes that gave rise to a particular economic structure, and that determined its institutional structure. This history is inscribed in the current forms of individual regions, and can lead to path dependencies, whereby present development trajectories depend on past dynamics, and are difficult to break away from.

Important insights into the contextual mechanisms that operate beyond the neighborhood level have been obtained by studying the differentiation of regional labor market outcomes in terms of unemployment, income, and poverty levels (Martin and Morrison, 2003; Cotter, 2002; Combes et al., 2008). Naturally, regional labor markets are not completely separate from each other, and are, in many cases, strongly intertwined. Nevertheless, the limited willingness of people to move for work, as well as their limited options for commuting to work – which may not be attractive depending on the distance to the workplace, the cost of travel, and amount of time spent commuting – are clear barriers to connecting the various regional systems.

To sum up, in our research, we refer to spatial disadvantage as a set of place-related features that contribute to the social disadvantage of the inhabitants of a given location, or that prevent them from escaping from this disadvantage.

### 3.4 Local and regional opportunity structures

One of the mechanisms of spatial disadvantage is the unequal availability of resources and opportunities in different places. In the 1990s, Galster and Killen (1995) introduced the concept of a 'metropolitan structure of opportunities' to describe the unequal distribution of resources in urban spaces. The factors included in this concept were markets for labor, housing, mortgages, and criminal activities; the local political system; the criminal justice system; the educational system; and the social service delivery system. They also took into account how local social networks influence the ability of people residing in different parts of the city to achieve their goals. The authors described this opportunity structure as "the panoply of markets, institutions, and systems that act on and convert personal attributes into outputs affecting social advancement" (Galster and Killen 1995: p. 9). The core of their argument was that within a city, opportunities are spatially structured unevenly, which contributes to social inequalities among different urban neighborhoods. The different spatial availability of individual opportunities is not the only factor that causes the inhabitants of some parts of a city to be disadvantaged relative to others. People's decisions about what opportunities to use may also be determined by their access to information and their value patterns, aspirations, and preferences. These opportunities are, according to Galster and Killen, heavily dependent on the environment in which a city's inhabitants live. Thus, neighborhood effects result from the interaction of spatially uneven structures of opportunities and social influences operating in the immediate residential environment.

Like other mechanisms of spatial disadvantage, the concept of 'opportunity structures' has mainly been discussed within urban studies. Galster and Sharkey (2017) expanded and generalized the concept so that it no longer had specific ties to a metropolitan area. They used the term 'spatial opportunity structure,' which can be an attribute of any residential locality, and is conceptualized as a factor that influences people's abilities to achieve their socioeconomic goals. Variations in geographic context across multiple scales (neighborhood, jurisdiction, metropolitan region) affect the socioeconomic outcomes that individuals can achieve in two ways: either by altering the payoffs that will be gained from the attributes individuals have during any given period, or by affecting the bundle of attributes that individuals will acquire (both passively and actively) during their lifetimes (Galster and Sharkey 2017: p. 1). Thus, the authors argued, for example, that the advantages to be derived from investing in education may differ according to the place inhabitants live in; and at the same time, that obtaining a good education may be easier or more difficult in different places.

Taking seriously the argument that opportunities are unevenly spatially structured beyond the metropolitan areas, we introduce in our model the concept of 'local and regional opportunity structures' (Figure 1; see Chapter 4) as a way of operationalizing spatial disadvantage. Focusing on rural areas, we highlight the regional level of opportunity structures, as well as the local scale. In rural areas, many services, such as hospitals, pharmacies, and schools, and resources like jobs and natural capital, are available on the regional rather than on the local scale. Thus, in many cases, the appropriate analytical scale seems to be the region rather than the local community or a neighborhood. While it makes sense to speak of opportunity-rich or opportunity-poor neighborhoods in metropolitan areas (Turner et al., 2012), the use of such detailed spatial scales is not convenient for research on rural areas. The regional level seems to be a more promising perspective for assessing the availability of opportunities. At the same time, this issue needs to have an empirical underpinning based on individuals' perceptions and actual behavior in space.

It has been repeatedly argued that access to opportunities is an important component and driver of disadvantage in rural areas. Shaw (1979) was one of the first scholars to relate social and spatial inequalities in rural areas to each other, and to highlight the role of transportation costs and impeded accessibilities ('mobility deprivation'). Referring to rural areas in the United States, Tickamyer and Duncan (1990) have argued that "the spatial dimension of limited opportunity has created and perpetuated a social structure that reinforces poverty and underdevelopment" (ibid., p. 69). They concluded that poor rural communities lack stable employment, opportunities for mobility, social structure diversity, and community investment. Later on, Cotter (2002) also used the notion of opportunity structures, understood as the "range of options available" (ibid., p. 536), in terms of labor market indicators to explain poverty levels across U.S. counties. In addition, some other authors, despite not explicitly using the concept of opportunity structures, have described rural areas in general and rural peripheries in particular as social spaces characterized by limited opportunity structures whose inhabitants have restricted choices of economic, educational, medical, and other services; and face specific obstacles in accessing them (for an overview, see Bernard et al., 2016; Philip and Shucksmith, 2003). Klärner and colleagues have focused on another important aspect of opportunity structures in rural areas: namely, poor people's limited access to social and welfare institutions and to meeting places, which hinders them from establishing social support networks and accessing opportunities for coping with poverty (Klärner, 2017; Klärner and Knabe, 2019). Another research project that seeks to capture the contextual mechanisms of disadvantage beyond the neighborhood level is comprised of studies of spatial differences in educational outcomes (Sharkey and Faber, 2014; Roscigno et al., 2006), and of various accessibility studies and studies on exclusion from transportation (Preston and Rajé, 2007; Lucas, 2012). Spatial access and transportation links to different types of public and private services vary between places, which creates an unequal pool of opportunities for their inhabitants.

In line with Bernard and Šafr (2019), we argue that investigating regional opportunities as a source of disadvantage is particularly promising in rural areas. Due to the low spatial density of opportunities in the countryside, access to opportunities is strongly related to transportation



costs, and, in many cases, also to time. Reaching opportunities in distant locations is associated with additional costs. Thus, rural inhabitants are more dependent than urban residents on a given set of nearby opportunities. Whereas in cities, low-quality or missing opportunities can frequently be relatively easily substituted with other options; in rural areas, such a substitution is more difficult and/or more costly. The importance of transportation and mobility to reach opportunities in rural areas is connected to the concept of regional opportunity structures, which offers theoretical insights into human activity patterns (e.g., Horton and Reynolds, 1971) and mobility potentials (Kaufmann et al., 2004). Interestingly, the mobility and activity patterns of socially disadvantaged groups in rural areas have rarely been researched. Connecting studies on regional opportunity structures with studies on the mobility and activity patterns of rural inhabitants could deliver important insights into social disadvantage in rural areas.

The concept of regional opportunity structures seems to provide a convenient approach for theorizing about the mechanisms through which spatial effects lead to disadvantage in rural areas. The weakness of the concept is its fuzziness. It might be related to a very broad range of physical, political, economic, and social institutions. Lung-Amam et al. (2018) observed that different opportunities might be relevant for different groups of inhabitants. Further challenges that have to be dealt with when using this concept are related to the meaning and extent of space: i.e., what one person considers very distant may seem close to another. Thus, where the boundaries of what can be considered a regional opportunity structure should be drawn is unclear (on the challenges of scale in future research on opportunity structures, see: van Ham and Manley, 2012: p. 2791). Additionally, regional opportunity structures can be perceived as an advantage for some and as a disadvantage for others; e.g., remoteness may be an asset for the rich and a disadvantage for the poor. In a critical review of the neighborhood effect research, Gotham (2003: p. 727) argued that it is “the interplay between space and poor people’s agency that are not well documented, either theoretically or in specific empirical areas.” Locally and regionally specific ‘survival strategies’ (Meert, 2000) have rarely been studied (for an exception, see: Bude et al., 2011). Thus, a clearer understanding is needed of what local and regional opportunity structures are relevant to the residents in general, and to socially disadvantaged groups in particular.

### 3.5 Agency

Stressing local and regional opportunity structures and their effects on the (re)production of social inequalities runs the risk of conceptualizing space as a container in which local opportunities determine individual behavior (Schroer, 2008: p. 139). However, actors are not mere victims of their environment; nor are they simply subjected to a lack of resources. Any research that takes the individual seriously must pay attention to agency, and consider space as an intervening, but not determining dimension of people’s daily practices. Such practices can also produce, form, or rearrange social space(s). Therefore, the concept of agency is central in our research (see Figure 1 in Chapter 4).

The concept of agency addresses the “age-old problem of free will and determinism” (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: p. 964). It designates “the capacity of socially embedded actors to appropriate, reproduce, and, potentially, to innovate upon received cultural categories and conditions of action in accordance with their personal and collective ideals, interests, and commitments” (Emirbayer and Goodwin, 1994: pp. 1442-1443). The concept of agency relates to the fundamental question of how social structures are reproduced and/or changed by individual actions, and how the cultural context for actions, decisions, intentions, choices, etc., is formed. “[T]he cultural context encompasses those symbolic patterns, structures, and formations (e.g., cultural discourses, narratives, and idioms) that constrain and enable action by structuring actors’ normative commitments and their understandings of their world and their possibilities within it” (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: p. 970; italics omitted). Thus, the concept of agency aims to integrate theories of structures with theories of action by referring to the capacity of individuals to act and to make choices within societal structures; to how social structures affect this capacity; and to how individual actions can (re)shape social structures. Moreover, in network research (see the next chapter), the structural perspective is complemented by integrating the concept of agency. This perspective avoids identifying either the human actor or the social structure as the causal origin of social action. Rather, actors and structures are seen as being inextricably the constituents of each other (Crossley, 2011: p. 126). In addition, in this processual understanding of structures, the constant possibility of change is conceptualized as inevitable, and the structures are seen as always at risk of changing (Sewell, 1992: p. 19).

Agency is, therefore, embedded in local and regional opportunity structures (e.g., public and private infrastructures) and social networks (e.g., family, friends, organizations) that enable or constrain individuals’ actions. At the same time, however, agency is seen as the source of the reproduction and transformation of the structures and networks surrounding the actor. Therefore, we perceive residents of rural peripheries not only as users of pre-existing local and regional opportunity structures, but also as having the potential to actively co-create and reproduce these structures (Mische, 2011: p. 89). On the individual level, we adopt an empirically reconstructed perspective regarding agency. Here, agency is viewed as relationally situated, subjectively interpreted, and circumscribed. Thus, the concrete aspects of agency are a matter of empirical reconstruction (Helfferich, 2012; Hitlin and Elder, 2007; Lucius-Hoene, 2012), which is one of our main research aims. In the remaining part of this chapter, we look at how socially disadvantaged groups perceive and deal with deficient local and regional opportunity structures, and how social networks mediate their efforts to cope with these challenges.

### 3.6 Ego-centric social networks

By referring to theories of structure and agency (Burt, 1982; Emirbayer and Mische, 1998), as well as by drawing on the concept of opportunity structures, we take a theoretical stance that

acknowledges that social actors are 'embedded' in a specific structural environment that is made up of societal institutions, specialized organizations, local communities, and networks of personal relations. This structure may constrain or enable actions (Burt, 1982: p. 9), but it does not predetermine them. Thus, resources are seen as being embedded in relationships, rather than as being individual assets. In this sense, networks of personal relations (in sociology, these are usually called social networks) represent a specific type of opportunity structure. Following Galster and Killen, we argue that social networks are important in "providing, evaluating, and shaping the information that guides perceptions" (Galster and Killen, 1995: p. 14); and we observe that social networks also provide access to resources beyond information, such as material resources (lending money, sharing a car, providing housing, etc.) or services (buying groceries, providing child care support, helping in the garden, etc.). Social network research explains social actions not on the basis of individual attributes, but in the context of social relations, because it views individual actions as interdependent with the actions of others (Wellman, 1988). Accordingly, the definition of the term 'social network' stresses the relationships between actors: "A social network consists of a finite set or sets of actors and the relation or relations defined on them" (Wasserman and Faust, 1994: p. 20). While the range of potential actors in a social network is wide (e.g., individuals, states, organizations), in the context of our research, we have chosen to focus on networks of human individuals and the relations or social ties between them (Crossley et al., 2015; McCarty et al., 2019). The nature of these social relations may vary: e.g., they may be economic, political, or affective; and they may be channels for the transfer of material or immaterial resources, social norms, or other types of positive and negative exchanges (Alwin et al., 2018; Wasserman and Faust, 1994).

Social network research distinguishes between 'whole' networks and egocentric networks. Whole networks refer to the structure of relationships in a social system; e.g., all relationships within a school class or a firm. In contrast, egocentric social networks focus on the structure of the relationships of an actor (called 'ego'); i.e., all the relevant relations ('alteri') for a specific purpose (individuals who would lend ego money, who would support ego in finding a job, who would do shopping for ego, etc.) (Perry et al., 2018). Since we are interested in the daily lives of socially disadvantaged people, their individual strategies for living in a rural peripheral area, and their resources, we focus on their egocentric social networks.

Research on social networks is based on the idea that social relations form regular patterns, which are referred to as network structures (Wasserman and Faust, 1994: p. 3); and that social phenomena are explained in terms of the structure of the network ('structural analysis', Wellman and Berkowitz, 1988). Efforts to understand the effects and the meanings of a certain relationship, and the broader pattern of ties and the exchanges between them, have to be taken into account (Barnes, 1972); e.g., the amount of support provided by a tie is affected by the extent to which network members know each other (Wellman and Kenneth, 2001). In this line of thought, individual actions can only be fully understood if we consider how these individuals are embedded in social networks, and how these networks are structured. At the same time, the structures and functions of social networks are embedded in larger societal structures. It has

been shown that social networks often tend toward homophily; i.e., toward including people with characteristics similar to ego's (McPherson et al., 2001). As a consequence, the resources available via social contacts (the social capital in Bourdieu's sense, Bourdieu 1986) are socially differentiated: generally, those individuals with higher social status not only have more resources themselves, they are also in contact with other people with more resources. Social inequality on the societal level translates into the structure and functioning of social networks on the meso level, and vice versa. This means that an individual may profit from having contact with people with higher social status by being able to increase his or her own resources. There is also research showing that the networks of socially disadvantaged persons are smaller; more restricted; and are more vulnerable to change, in the sense that if they lose ties, these losses cannot be compensated for by establishing new ties (Ajrouch et al., 2001; Cornwell, 2015). Longitudinal research has indicated that falling into poverty weakens social relations, leads to declines in contact frequency, and reduces access to resources (Böhnke and Link, 2017; Mood and Jonsson, 2016).

While social disadvantage plays an important role in shaping social networks, social networks are also relevant in dealing with social disadvantage. In particular, people with low economic resources tend to rely heavily on social networks to provide them with support of various kinds (Ciabattari, 2007; Edin and Lein, 1997; Harknett, 2006; Small, 2009). However, relying on network support can also strain relationships and lead to social isolation (Lubbers et al., 2020; Marquardsen, 2012) or inhibit social mobility (Domínguez and Watkins, 2003). This brief overview shows that the relationships between social networks and social disadvantage are complex, and that the mechanisms and conditions under which social relations reinforce or buffer social disadvantage are not yet well researched (Keim-Klärner, 2020).

Relationships between social networks and territorial space have been discussed for decades. While social network research focusing on the community question set out to be 'aspatial' – i.e., to collect information on the social relations of relevance for an individual, rather than to look at specific neighborhoods or villages – regardless of where individuals are based (Wellman, 1979), various studies on personal relations have acknowledged that space matters (Cattell, 2001; Kesselring, 2006; Mollenhorst et al., 2014; see for an overview: Small and Adler, 2019). However, despite a recent increase in interest in the relationship between network processes and geographical distance, little is known about their interrelations or joint effects (Habinek et al., 2015). As is the case for other concepts referred to in this paper, social relations have often been researched in urban areas. By contrast, research centered on people living in rural areas, or even in rural peripheries, is rare (interesting exceptions are the following studies: Brauer, 2015; Lohmeier, 2003; Montes et al., 2018; Ward and Turner, 2007). We argue that the forms of social networks – and, as a consequence, the quality and the amount of resources – individuals have access to are related to the geographic environment. Thus, for example, social networks in some rural areas may be weakened by the selective outmigration of younger and more skilled individuals (Klärner and Knabe, 2019).

Because the network structures in which individuals are embedded depend on their chances of getting into contact to other persons and establishing ties with them, we are interested in how these ties get formed: What are the places, institutions, or events where people meet? In general terms, these social and spatial structures and contexts (Entwisle et al., 2007) can be called ‘foci.’ A focus in this context is defined as an “extra-network social structure that systematically produces patterns in a social network” (Feld, 1981: p. 1016). In general, important foci are schools, workplaces, neighborhoods, and clubs (An, 2011; Feld, 1981; Settersten, 2018). These foci can be socially strongly segregated (poor vs. upper-class neighborhoods, private vs. public schools, low vs. highly paid work). Klärner and Knabe (2019) identified public meeting places and community centers as important foci for poor people, stressing that those living in rural areas are more likely to lack access to such places, which can lead to increased vulnerability. Thus, foci are strongly linked to the local and regional opportunity structures discussed above, both of which are shaped by social and spatial inequalities. How social and spatial inequalities, space, and social network structures are interrelated is, therefore, an important question in our research.

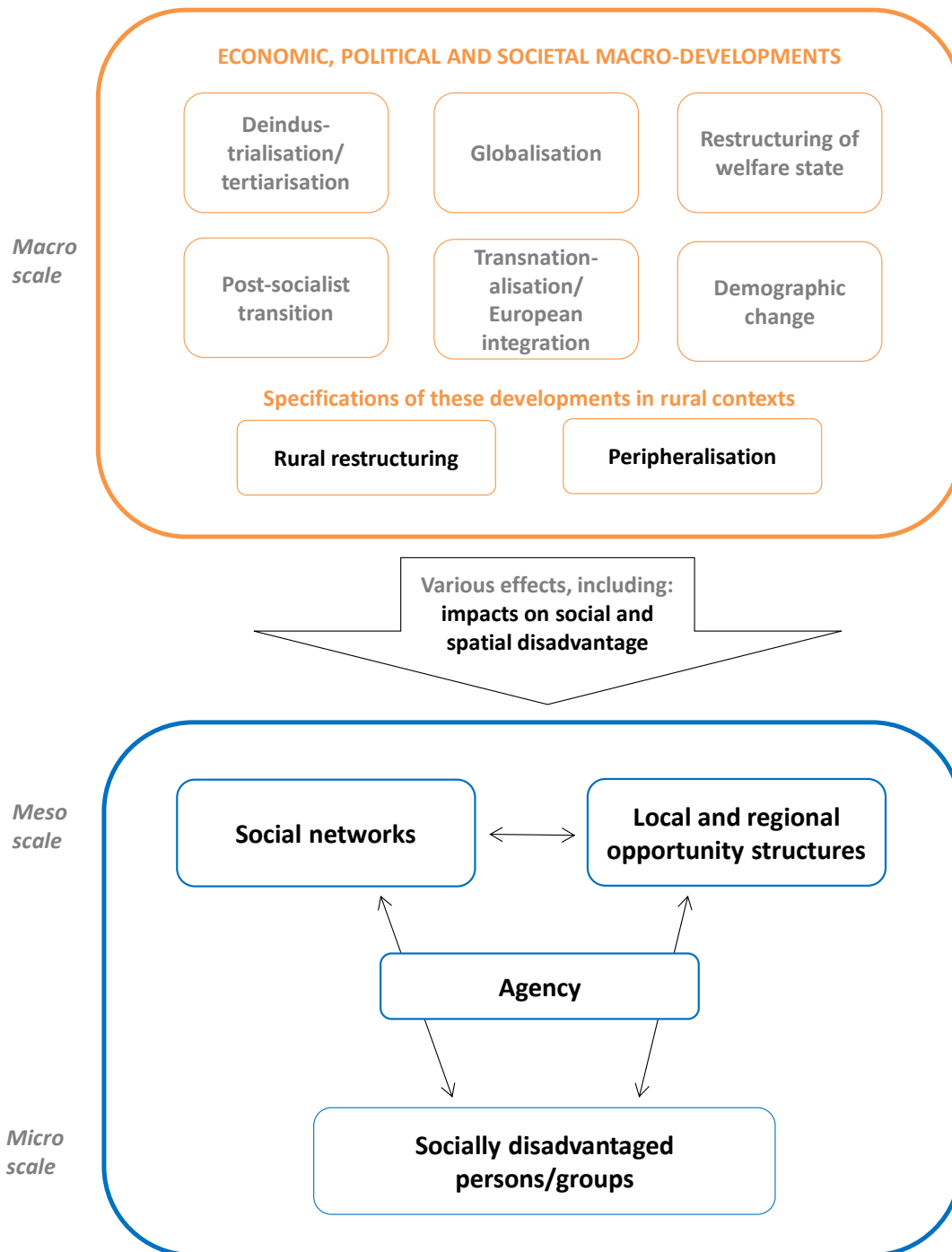
Moreover, the meanings and the importance of foci may differ for various people, since from our theoretical standpoint, places (as foci) are constituted in a processual manner for each person who visits this place (again) by him/herself, and who does something or meets other people there. We believe that the processual connotation of places as foci is especially well captured by Doreen Massey’s (2005: p. 139) idea of places as ongoing stories. In line with this idea – but so far lacking direct theoretical references in the literature – is Harrison White’s concept of stories that are embedded in parts of an individual’s social network; the so-called ‘network domains’ (White, 2008: pp. 28-30) According to White, this approach is suitable for theoretically conceptualizing the (re)organization of parts of an individual’s social network around different foci. With these theoretical refinements of Feld’s (1981) focus theory, we believe that the meanings of the places visited by ego can be properly considered, and, at the same time, a direct connection to their social networks can be drawn.

Our reflections in this chapter on important concepts related to social disadvantage and spatial disadvantage and their interrelations are transferred into a research design that allows data on local and regional opportunity structures, social networks, and the agency of socially disadvantaged groups living in rural peripheries to be collected and analyzed. Before outlining the research design, the next chapter distils our previous reasoning into a conceptual model.

## 4 The interrelation of social disadvantage and spatial disadvantage: conceptual model

In order to display our theoretical considerations and the interlinkages of the concepts we used, we developed a three-level conceptual model based on the concepts and considerations that have been discussed above (Figure 1). The model comprises the macro level of economic, political, and societal processes; the meso level of social networks and opportunity structures; and the micro level of the individual agency of socially disadvantaged individuals or groups. In our research, we keep the concepts of social disadvantage and spatial disadvantage separate. This is mainly for heuristic reasons, as we are particularly interested in the interplay of these two dimensions of disadvantage. Thus, we refer to spatial disadvantage as a set of spatial factors that contribute to the (re)production of social disadvantage in a given place. In turn, we define social disadvantage as an outcome of general social, economic, and political factors in a given society that is also influenced by spatial differences in the provision and the availability of resources and opportunities.

**Figure 1: Conceptual model**



Source: authors' considerations.

The general societal processes creating social disadvantage and spatial disadvantage are located on the *macro level* of the model. The conceptualization is derived from theories of global social change that affect the economic, political, and social structures of western states. Global social change comprises processes of deindustrialization and tertiarization, as well as economic globalization, post-socialist transitions, trans-nationalization, and European integration. It also affects demographic change and the restructuring of welfare state regimes. These processes shape social disadvantage and spatial disadvantage. Looking specifically at rural areas, we see that these processes are included in the conceptualization of peripheralization processes and rural restructuring.

Social networks, as well as local and regional opportunity structures, are located on the *meso level* of our model, and are influenced by macro-level institutions like the labor market and the political and welfare systems. They enable and constrain individual behavior, and thereby build opportunities for behavior. In doing so, social networks affect how individuals perceive, access, and deal with local and regional opportunity structures. Thus, social networks are linked to social disadvantage and opportunity structures in two ways. On the one hand, they are shaped by the social and spatial structures that are available. On the other hand, they may provide resources (e.g., financial support) to overcome structural constraints. As a consequence, social networks have both a tendency to reproduce existing structures, as well as the potential to offer people the resources they need to overcome these barriers.

On the *micro level*, the concept of agency is central in our research approach, and, therefore, in our conceptual model. Societal institutions and processes on the macro level affect social networks and local and regional opportunity structures, and, in turn, influence how individuals lead their everyday lives. However, the behavior of people as actors is not predetermined by these structures, as individuals may use them in various ways, and can shape them through their own activities and networking efforts. In practice, this means that people can try to establish and cultivate contacts with individuals they perceive as helpful, and they can set up opportunity structures for themselves and others. People may, for example, start a day care group or open a shop that provides products that have been missing locally, or they can motivate their network partners to change local opportunity structures.



## 5 Researching social disadvantage and spatial disadvantage in rural peripheries: study design

The general objective of our research is to investigate the multifaceted relationships between social disadvantage, local and regional opportunity structures, and individual agency in rural peripheries in Czechia and eastern Germany. Our research focuses on two sets of questions. The first set of questions concerns the spatial patterns of social disadvantage, as well as the extent and the prevailing forms of social disadvantage and opportunity structures in spatially disadvantaged regions; that is, in rural peripheries. The second set of questions examines the impact of local and regional opportunity structures within the residential context on particularly disadvantaged groups, and the relationships between opportunity structures, ego-centered social networks, and individual agency.

While the first set of questions can best be answered through quantitative analyses of statistical data, the second set of questions can be better addressed using a mixed-methods approach. Therefore, we combine:

- (1) quantitative methods to investigate the extent and the specifics of social disadvantage and spatial disadvantage in rural areas in Czechia and eastern Germany in general (Chapter 5.1); and
- (2) mixed methods (with a focus on qualitative tools) to conduct four in-depth regional case studies in rural peripheries in the two societies (Chapter 5.2).

In the following, we give an overview of the research design. A more detailed discussion of the methodology used, as well as of the research findings, will be the subject of future publications.

### 5.1 Mapping patterns of social disadvantage and spatial disadvantage

In a first step, we map social disadvantage and spatial disadvantage in rural areas in the whole of eastern Germany and Czechia. The aim of the analyses is to build indices of disadvantage, to map regional structures and dynamics, and to study the relationships between social disadvantage and spatial disadvantage. These investigations also help us in choosing the case study regions. We base our measurement of social disadvantage and spatial disadvantage in rural areas on four main dimensions:

- (1) indicators for rurality;
- (2) indicators for social disadvantage, i.e., measures of individual and household deprivation;
- (3) indicators for spatial disadvantage, i.e., local and regional opportunity structures (particularly their availability and accessibility); and

- (4) indicators for specific regional dynamics, particularly with regard to their recent economic development.

Indicators for rurality build the first dimension given our research interest in the variety of rural peripheries. We exclude urban areas by definition. We are aware that urban areas can be peripheral or peripheralized as well. This topic is, however, beyond the scope of our research.

Indicators for social disadvantage aim to capture social inequality at the individual and the household level.

Indicators for spatial disadvantage mainly focus on the role of local and regional opportunity structures and the specific characteristics of rural peripheries. The search for the dimensions and individual indicators is directed by the following three principles: 1) to mirror important dimensions of local and regional opportunities; 2) to highlight the specific rural situations in which the spatial accessibility of services and institutions is an important aspect of their availability; and 3) to differentiate between opportunities in terms of the spatial structures that create inequality, and the resulting outcomes in terms of the existing concentrations of socioeconomic disadvantage. In this vein, we conceptually distinguish the following dimensions of local and regional opportunity structures: economic opportunities, services and amenities (including education), opportunities for community and political integration (welfare institutions, clubs, social networks), the physical and natural environment, and transportation infrastructure.

As the indicators we have considered so far form a rather static picture of social disadvantage and spatial disadvantage, we also include indicators for specific regional dynamics that enable us to capture local and regional changes over time. In particular, we are searching for evidence of economic dynamics, such as an increase in jobs in the secondary sector or economic investments in tourism infrastructure. This approach is based on our conviction that rural restructuring is continuously ongoing, and that – at least on the small scale – negative economic and demographic developments might also be reversed. We also believe that societal processes are not occurring in a linear sense, and that unintended as well as unexpected outcomes of certain developments are always possible.

Empirically, general data availability and the need to find comparable data in two countries may lead us to make some concessions and compromises in the course of the analyses. In particular, indicators for opportunities for community and political integration and physical and natural environment have so far been difficult to obtain.

By mapping patterns of social disadvantage and spatial disadvantage, we seek to answer the following research questions:

- What spatial patterns of social disadvantage can be identified in rural areas?

- What spatial patterns of local and regional opportunity structures (i.e., spatial disadvantage) can be identified in rural areas?
- How does spatial disadvantage interrelate with social disadvantage?

Based on our findings, we are interested in identifying peripheralized regions that are characterized by high levels of social disadvantage and spatial disadvantage. Therefore, we ask:

- Where can rural peripheries be localized based on the spatial structures of social disadvantage and opportunity structures, and what forms do they typically take?

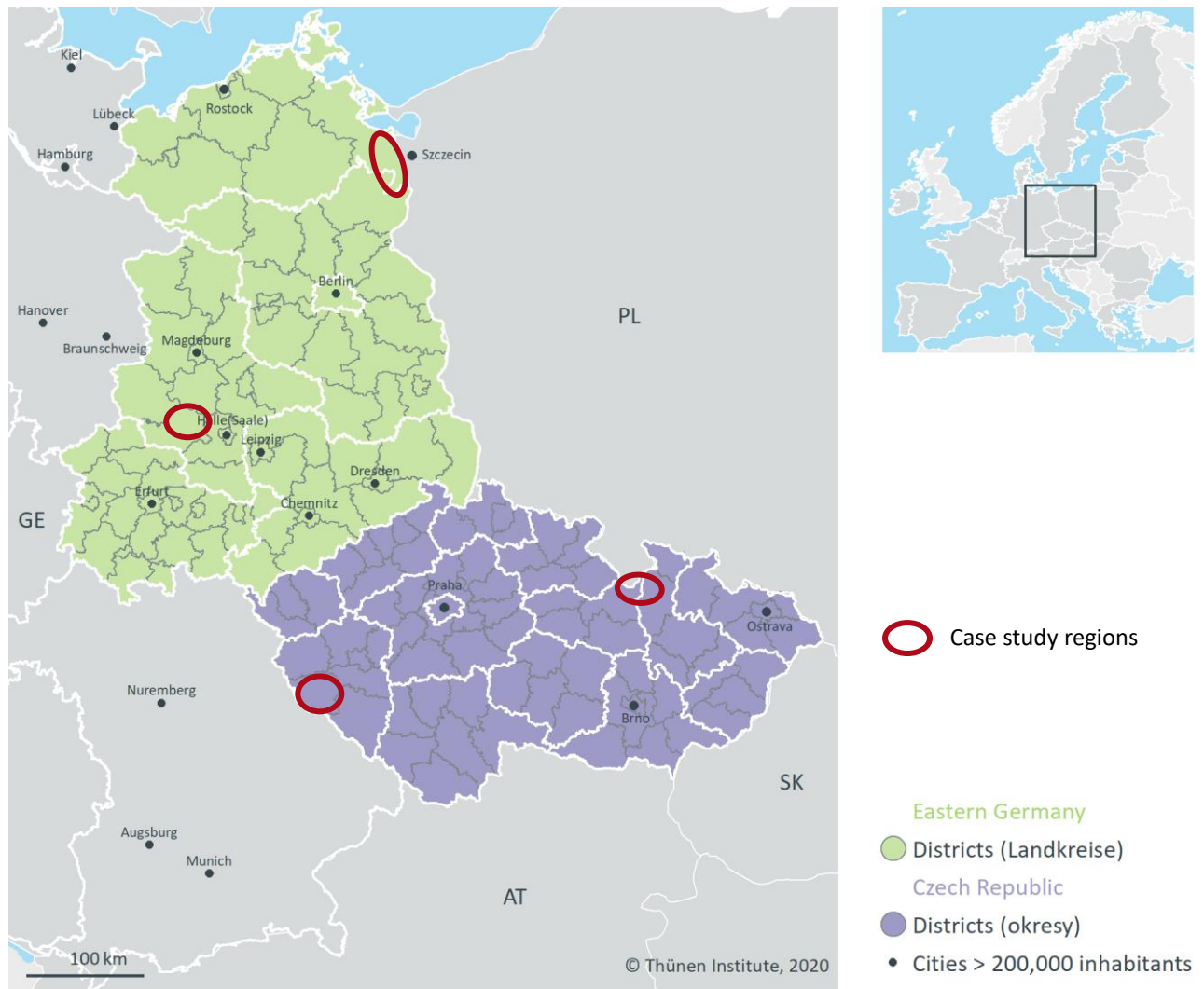
## 5.2 In-depth regional case studies on living in rural peripheries

Based on the mapping of social disadvantage and spatial disadvantage as presented in the previous chapter and a principal component analysis, four peripheral rural regions have been chosen for in-depth case studies.<sup>3</sup> The case studies take place in rural regions with comparatively poor access to public and private services, high rates for the principal component of ‘unemployment and exclusion,’ and low rates for the ‘qualification and standard of living’ component. They also rank as ‘very rural’ with ‘less good socioeconomic conditions’ on the Thünen Rurality Index (Küpper, 2016).

Several rural regions fit these criteria. Our aim was to look at rural peripheries from a new perspective in order to avoid reproducing already well-established narratives on rural peripheries caught in vicious circles of decline. We selected regions in which some kinds of dynamic change can currently be observed. In the case study areas in Czechia (Bor region and western Jeseníky), these are labor market dynamics (establishment of new businesses, particularly logistics and automotive suppliers) and dynamics in tourism (development of new large-scale tourist facilities), respectively. In the eastern German peripheral regions, it was impossible to find comparable forms of dynamic change in the current labor market or tourism sector. However, the district of Mansfeld-Südharz is a region that, despite having various challenges, has been able to keep an industrial core in the decades after reunification. The district of Vorpommern-Greifswald is characterized by yet another form of regional dynamic change: as well as having tourism activities on the Baltic Sea coast in the north of the district, it is located close to the Polish agglomeration of Szczecin. Thus, this region is experiencing the immigration of Polish families who build or buy homes to live and work part-time in Germany, or who commute to Poland for work. As the two German regions are rather large in terms of territory, two smaller case study regions have been selected for the in-depth empirical analysis: the eastern part of Vorpommern-Greifswald at the Polish border and the northwestern part of Mansfeld-Südharz (Figure 2).

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<sup>3</sup> To identify the regions, we performed a principal component analysis (PCA) of various factors measuring social and regional disadvantage and the accessibility of public and private services. It is not the intention of this Working Paper to present the methodological steps and results of the PCA. Further information can be obtained from the authors.

**Figure 2: The four case study regions in eastern Germany and Czechia**

Source: Administrative boundaries: © EuroGeographics 2020; © Geobasis-DE/BKG 2019.

The empirical analyses in all four case study areas are performed similarly, and comprise two steps. First, we conduct expert interviews with individuals who are working in leading political, economic, or administrative positions or in the social sector, as well as with individuals who are engaged in social services or local clubs. Second, we interview individuals who belong to three social groups living in these areas. These groups are: 1) people who are unemployed or are experiencing substandard working conditions; 2) single parents; and 3) senior residents who are living alone. All three resident groups can be characterized as having a high risk of experiencing social disadvantage. In the following, the methodology of the expert and resident interviews will be presented in more detail.

### 5.2.1 Expert interviews

To develop an understanding of the current situation and the dynamics in the regions under investigation and to analyze local and regional opportunity structures, we intend to conduct about 10 to 20 expert interviews per region with representatives of authorities, local politicians, planners, community practitioners, representatives of social service agencies, and other regional stakeholders. These interviews will serve as a dataset in their own right, but the experts will also function as gatekeepers, and will be asked to help to recruit respondents for the interviews with residents.

The research questions regarding the expert interviews are as follows:

- How do the experts perceive and evaluate the development of the region from the past to the present?
- How do they perceive and evaluate the living conditions in the region?
- What local and regional opportunity structures are available? What structures are missing?
- How do the experts perceive social inequality in their local community/region?
- What are socially disadvantaged groups in this area, and how do the experts perceive them?
- How do the experts perceive and evaluate political support for the region?
- What are the experts' views on the future of the region?

### 5.2.2 Resident interviews

The problem-centered interviews (Witzel and Reiter, 2012) with residents (30 per region) will collect qualitative accounts on the residents' personal living situations, their daily lives, their daily mobility, their perceptions of the availability and accessibility of opportunity structures, and their individual strategies for living in a rural periphery. We will ask the residents about their perceptions of the region, and about the role of different political scales and modes of policymaking. Their responses will help us to learn more about how regional opportunities intersect with individual-level social disadvantage. The interviews will also include the collection of ego-centered network data using the Software Vennmaker (Gamper et al., 2012), and of information on social contacts and social support.

Additionally, among the residents interviewed, 15 respondents per region have been asked to participate in a 14-day GPS-based tracking of their time-space activity patterns. This is a rather new and direct way of collecting mobility patterns that does not rely solely on ex-post accounts of places visited provided during the interview (Hirsch et al., 2014; Klous et al., 2017; Kwan, 2004; North et al., 2017). The mobility maps produced by this method will form the basis for a follow-

up interview with the respondent. This second interview will help us better understand the subjective meanings of the indicated mobility patterns and the places visited.

The resident interviews conducted in rural peripheries in Czechia and eastern Germany are designed to enable us to answer the following research questions:

- How are particularly disadvantaged groups affected by the specific residential context of a peripheral rural area with its local and regional opportunity structures?
- How are individual agency and strategies for dealing with disadvantage intertwined with existing opportunities?
- What opportunity structures matter in what ways to different disadvantaged social groups, and how are these structures dealt with by individuals?
- How do processes of rural restructuring affect the approaches residents use to deal with disadvantage?
- What is the role of social networks in reproducing/overcoming social disadvantage and spatial disadvantage?
- What mobility and activity patterns does the GPS mapping reveal? What differences can be identified between the three social groups, and with regard to individually varying patterns of social networks or settlement structures?

Since we are interested in the interplay of social disadvantage and spatial disadvantage, we intend to focus on social groups at high risk of experiencing social disadvantage. We assume that they are among the actors most affected by peripheralization and spatial disadvantage in rural peripheries. From the many possible groups, we intend to focus on three groups in particular:

- Individuals who are disadvantaged on the labor market because they are currently or have often been unemployed, or have experienced insecure or even precarious working conditions.
- Single parents, because these individuals – most of whom are women – frequently have a high poverty risk, and tend to experience difficulties combining work and care duties. Because they live in a region where mobility and accessibility are already significant challenges, these single parents may have to tighten their everyday arrangements.
- Senior residents living alone in their household, because these individuals are most likely to be affected by the mobility restrictions and accessibility problems in rural peripheries. Moreover, due to the outmigration of the younger generations (which is more pronounced in eastern Germany than in Czechia), we expect their social networks to be rather small.

We have chosen these three groups based on theoretical considerations and previous research (Brown and Lichter, 2004; Klärner and Knabe, 2019; Shergold and Parkhurst, 2012). We suggest that they are at particular risk of experiencing social disadvantage, but whether people who belong to these groups actually experience social disadvantage or perceive themselves as

disadvantaged, and how they use and evaluate opportunities and social networks in their residential environment, are empirical questions that we seek to answer.

## 6 Summary and outlook

This Working Paper has introduced a conceptual model for researching the interrelations of social disadvantage and spatial disadvantage. It is grounded in the research project 'Social disadvantage in rural peripheries in Czechia and eastern Germany: opportunity structures and individual agency in a comparative perspective.' Although social disadvantage and spatial disadvantage are interlinked in many ways, the authors have chosen to keep them separate in the concept definition and description, as well as in the project's quantitative analyses. The model introduced here takes a multi-level view and links macro developments and meso-level factors with people's perceptions and practices; i.e., the micro scale. In particular, the paper has introduced and discussed relevant theoretical concepts, such as peripheralization and rural restructuring, and has addressed questions of structure and agency. The authors have focused on local and regional opportunity structures as well as ego-centric social networks as major intervening and mediating factors that restrict and facilitate the daily practices of socially disadvantaged groups in rural peripheries. One major empirical concern we seek to address is how people make sense of and use their local environment, their resources, and their restrictions. To that end, we have conceptualized interlinkages between individual agency, and have looked at how regional opportunity structures and social networks are used and shaped.

In line with the theoretical considerations for this Working Paper, the research design we have developed was briefly presented, while focusing on two sets of research questions. The first set concerns the patterns of social disadvantage and spatial disadvantage in rural areas in Czechia and eastern Germany. Area-level secondary data and accessibility analyses will be applied to these questions, although the availability of comparable data in both countries is a major restriction of the empirical work. The second set examines the impact of opportunity structures within the residential context of particularly disadvantaged groups, and the relationships between opportunity structures and individual agency in four case study regions. The case study regions have relatively weak socioeconomic conditions and considerable accessibility restrictions. In these regions, interviews will be conducted with experts, as well as with residents belonging to three socially disadvantaged groups. The data collection for the residents is based on a complex design that combines problem-centered interviews with social network research and the collection of GPS data on individual mobility.

As this Working Paper centered on the theoretical model, the methodological considerations were not communicated in depth. The methodological details of this complex mixed-methods approach, a discussion of the underlying considerations, as well as reflections on the experiences and challenges associated with the research process, are subjects for future publications. In addition, the research results and the comparative perspective dealing with the three different groups in the four regions in the two countries will be developed in more depth when we publish our initial research results in the course of 2021.



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