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Exploring the Philosophical Foundations of Regional Revitalization and Their Implications for University Social Responsibility and Sustainable Curriculum Design

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Abstract **Original Research Article**

This study examines the philosophical underpinnings of regional revitalization and analyzes their implications for university social responsibility (USR) and sustainable curriculum development. Through literature analysis and conceptual interpretation, the study identifies six core dimensions of the philosophy of regional revitalization: 1. The reconstruction of sense of place and the everyday lived world; 2. The regeneration of local vitality encompassing livelihood, livability, and life-making; 3. To put it more concretely, long-term viability values centered on cyclical "renewal" rather than extractive development; 4. A pluralistic perspective that challenges linear modernization and singular growth-oriented paradigms; 5. To put it more concretely, An values of healing that responds to community wounds caused by development-driven disruptions; and 6. A philosophy of everyday life rooted in embodied experience and local aesthetics.

At the level of higher education practice, this study proposes four guiding principles for USR-oriented curriculum design: place-based learning that positions the locale as teacher; community co-creation as a collaborative mode of governance; long-term viability values as the normative foundation of curriculum design; and the "trans local" framing of local issues within global and SDGs-aligned contexts. The study concludes that universities must move beyond project-based or short-term USR models toward approaches grounded in the everyday lived world of local communities. By re-centering public action, value-based involvement, and long-term long-term viability, higher education institutions can become key partners in fostering regional regeneration and sustainable social transformation.

Keywords: University social responsibility (USR), Sustainable development Goals (SDGs), Regional revitalization, Higher Education.

1. Research Background and Problem Awareness

Over the past two decades, the combined forces of globalization, neoliberal governance, and metropolitan-centered development have reshaped socio-spatial orders across the world, resulting in multifaceted crises such as population outmigration, industrial

marginalization, and the erosion of cultural lifeworlds (Harvey, 2005; Sassen, 2014). Taiwan, shaped by rapid urbanization, industrial relocation, and capital concentration, has likewise experienced significant regional disparities. These include: 1. Intensified population decline and demographic aging as young people migrate to metropolitan areas, weakening the vitality of rural communities; 2. Industrial decline and deteriorating living functions as agricultural, fishing, and small-scale industrial sectors face the pressures of global competition; and 3. Accelerated ruptures in local cultures and everyday knowledge, particularly in rural and fishing villages where artisanal practices, narratives, and embodied skills have been disrupted by modernization (Li, 2019; Lin & Wu, 2018; Hsu, 2022).

Against this backdrop, the concept of regional revitalization (chiiki sōsei) first emerged in Japan not merely as a policy tool but as a socio-philosophical project concerned with rethinking how places grow, why places matter, and how local life can be regenerated (Cabinet Office, 2014). Regional revitalization involves more than the reallocation of population, industries, and resources; rather, it entails the ontological (ontology), axiological (axiology), and communitarian (philosophy of community) reconstruction of the relationships between residents, land, and culture (Ingold, 2011). Since Taiwan formally introduced regional revitalization policies in 2019, the National Development Council has emphasized "local self-reliance" and "resident participation" as core principles for restoring vitality and envisioning the future of localities (National Development Council, 2019).

However, the significance of regional revitalization extends far beyond policy implementation. Its deeper meaning lies in cultural, ethical, and philosophical reflection: Why is a place worth preserving? How should the relationship between humans and land be reconstructed? Must our imagination of local futures move beyond the narrow logic of market-driven development? These questions reveal that regional revitalization is not simply an economic development strategy but a social philosophy concerned with justice, cultural continuity, and the reconstruction of the lifeworld (Harvey, 2012; Santos, 2014).

Following the release of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, education has been redefined as a key mechanism for advancing sustainability, equity, and civic capacity (UNESCO, 2017). In alignment with this global agenda, Taiwan's Ministry of Education launched the University Social Responsibility (USR) initiative in 2017, assigning universities three core missions: 1. Responsiveness to local needs, 2. Cross-sector collaboration, and 3. Commitment to sustainability (Tsai & Yeh, 2025). Yet empirical studies indicate that many USR projects remain short-term, project-based, and activity-driven, leading to three structural challenges (McIlrath et al., 2012; Vallaeys, 2014): 1. The absence of deep trust between universities and communities; 2. A failure to engage with the core issues of the local lifeworld; and 3. Student learning that remains confined to low-level service participation rather than transformative, civic-oriented praxis.

Without philosophical, ethical, and critical grounding, USR risks devolving into bureaucratic, technocratic, and performance-driven governance (Biesta, 2010), thereby losing its essence as a form of public educational practice. Accordingly, this article argues that contemporary higher education encounters three critical ruptures in advancing USR and regional revitalization:

1. The philosophical foundations of regional revitalization remain underdeveloped, limiting its integration into curricula. Existing discussions often emphasize economic or policy dimensions, yet overlook ontological perspectives on place as lifeworld (Husserl, 1970), communitarian conceptions of locality (Taylor, 2004), and epistemologies of local knowledge (Santos, 2014).

2. University curricula lack the capacity to address local complexity. Many USR courses rely on visits, short-term activities, or workshops, failing to engage historical wounds, structural

issues, and cultural memory.

3. USR curricula lack public action, reducing students to service providers rather than actors and citizens who participate in public issues (Biesta, 2011).

To address these gaps, this study adopts documentary analysis and philosophical interpretation to explore two core research questions: 1. What are the philosophical foundations of regional revitalization, and how do its core concepts respond to the vitality, culture, and sustainability of place? 2. How can universities design socially engaged curricula that localize, sustain, and democratize educational practices, enabling USR to become an action-oriented and ethically committed form of education?

Through these inquiries, the article seeks to construct a philosophical and sustainability-oriented framework for USR curriculum design that aligns with the principles of regional revitalization, offering a theoretical foundation for advancing social engagement and local sustainability within higher education.

2. Theoretical and Philosophical Foundations of Regional Revitalization

Although regional revitalization originated within policy discourse, its essence extends far beyond administrative planning or technical regional governance. Rather, it represents a form of philosophical praxis that encompasses questions of local ontology, cultural ethics, and the reconstruction of the lifeworld. As noted by the Cabinet Office (2014), regional revitalization concerns not only population return, industrial renewal, or spatial regeneration; it addresses a more fundamental inquiry: How can a place be re-understood, re-experienced, and regenerated? Drawing from relevant literature and theoretical trajectories, this section elaborates six key philosophical dimensions of regional revitalization.

2.1 Sense of Place and Identity: The Philosophical Basis of Place as Lifeworld

The first core of regional revitalization lies in re-establishing the emotional attachment and existential meaning between people and land. Tuan's (1977) concept of the sense of place highlights that place is an "affective–geographical" field produced through bodily experience, everyday practice, and cultural engagement. Relph (1976) further emphasizes that a place becomes meaningful not because of its coordinates on a map, but because of its irreplaceability and existential significance.

In Taiwan, youth outmigration and the influx of newcomers have rendered local identity increasingly fluid and plural. Consequently, regional revitalization underscores the coexistence of the lived experiences of those who remain, return, and relocate. Husserl's (1970) notion of the lifeworld offers an important philosophical foundation: locality is not an external object but a source of meaning-making, the ontological ground through which residents understand the world and coexist with others.

In this sense, the true starting point of regional revitalization is the reconstruction of the ontological relationship between human beings and place—allowing localities to once again become lived, felt, meaningful, and worthy of sustained engagement.

2.2 The Creation of "Life": A Regenerative Philosophy of Local Vitality

The concept of revitalization inherently denotes regeneration and the emergence of new life. In contemporary place studies, localities are increasingly understood as generative (Ray, 1998; Woods, 2010)—as living, evolving entities. Their development may be conceptualized through three interconnected dimensions:

1. Vitality: the restoration of local dynamism, including cultural agency, demographic energy, and the renewal of social organizations (Ray, 1998; Woods, 2010).

2. Livability: the cultivation of quality of life, communal ties, and meaningful lifeworlds through embodied experiences of place (Ingold, 2011; Zhao et al., 2025).

3. Livelihood: the capacity for residents to sustain their lives locally through resilient

industries, social capital, and sustainable economic structures (Scoones, 1998; Li et al., 2020).

This conceptualization resonates with the philosophy of organism, which views localities as relational, interactive, and generative wholes rather than administrative units to be managed. Thus, the core question of regional revitalization is not "How do we develop a place?" but rather, "How do we ensure that a place can continue to live?"—a profoundly ethical and philosophical inquiry.

2.3 Revitalization as Sustainable "Activation": The Ethics and Cyclicality of Local Renewal

As sustainable development has become a central paradigm in global governance, the "activation" of localities within regional revitalization has shifted from linear development to a form of cyclical, ethical cultivation (National Development Council, 2019). Its philosophical meaning emerges through three interrelated cycles: 1. Environmental cycles: regenerating landscapes, ecosystems, and rural/coastal ecologies. 2. Social cycles: restoring community reciprocity, intergenerational learning, social solidarity, and inclusive participation. 3. Cultural cycles: preserving, translating, and creatively renewing local memories, crafts, and everyday rituals.

These resonate with UNESCO's (2017) framework for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), which emphasizes environmental, social, and cultural dimensions as inseparable pillars of sustainability. Hence, *activation* is not about doing more but about doing what aligns with the intrinsic rhythms and character of place. Revitalization becomes an ethical return to the land—practicing sustainability in ways attuned to the locality's own temporalities and ecological logic.

2.4 Challenging the Single Development Model: A Post-Neoliberal Pluralistic View of Place

Conventional modernization paradigms often assume the superiority of urban models, positioning rural or peripheral areas as "backward" spaces in need of uplift. In contrast, regional revitalization articulates a fundamentally different philosophical stance: the value of a place should not be measured against a singular developmental trajectory but evaluated in relation to its cultural, social, and lived contexts.

This perspective is grounded in three major theoretical currents:

1. Post-neoliberal critique, which exposes the limits of market rationality in addressing structural inequalities (Harvey, 2005; Stiglitz, 2013);

2. New Localism, which emphasizes local agency, contextual development pathways, and territorially grounded innovation (Davoudi, 2012);

3. Cultural politics, which recognizes the political and public significance of local cultural practices (Hall, 2011).

From this standpoint, regional revitalization asserts that localities need not aspire to become miniature cities nor pursue linear, urban-centered modernization. Instead, places should cultivate their own modes of becoming, reflective of their unique histories, cultural logics, and community aspirations.

2.5 From "Trauma" to "Revitalization": Rebuilding the Ethics of Place

Many localities have suffered forms of place-based trauma arising from tourism-driven development, industrial expansion, and externally imposed imaginaries—manifesting in cultural commodification, landscape deterioration, and community conflict. Consequently, regional revitalization underscores that development must not reproduce harm or exacerbate existing vulnerabilities. Rather, it should be guided by an ethics of place.

This ethical orientation resonates with Levinas's (1969) philosophy of responding to the vulnerability of the other. In the context of regional revitalization, this implies that: 1. Development should respond to residents' lived needs rather than external valuations; 2. Local

healing and the repair of past injustices form the precondition for revitalization; 3. Genuine revitalization emerges only when a place becomes livable, safe, and dignified for those who inhabit it.

Thus, regional revitalization is not merely a matter of "doing projects" but an ethical praxis of acknowledging, addressing, and transforming local wounds.

2.6 Localization and Embodied Experience: Toward a Place-Based Aesthetics and Philosophy of Everyday Life

Regional revitalization stresses that the value of place cannot be defined through an external gaze but must emerge from residents' lived practices and embodied experiences (Ingold, 2011). This orientation integrates insights from the aesthetics of place, embodied learning, and the philosophy of everyday life.

Understanding place, therefore, is not solely a visual or representational act but a bodily and experiential one—achieved through walking, working, cooking, participating in rituals, and engaging in conversations with community members. Through such practices, place becomes not a static cultural symbol but a *lived world*—felt, understood, and cherished through everyday encounters.

In this sense, regional revitalization repositions locality as an experiential and affective field, where meaning is continually produced through bodily engagement and shared life.

3. Course Design and Sustainable Actions in USR

The philosophical foundations of regional revitalization not only offer a renewed conceptual framework for understanding place but also provide a fundamental educational rationale for reorienting USR curriculum design. Under the growing influence of neoliberal governance, performance-based evaluation, and short-term project management in higher education, USR courses are frequently at risk of devolving into "activity-based outputs," "short-term deliverables," or "technocratic planning" (Biesta, 2010; McIlrath et al., 2012). Consequently, university social practice must shift from traditional service-delivery models toward educational approaches grounded in co-creation with communities, sustainability ethics, and public action (Vallaeys, 2014). Guided by the philosophical implications of regional revitalization, this section presents four core action principles for curriculum design.

3.1 Place as Teacher: Developing Place-Sensitivity and Landscape-Based Learning

Place-based education (PBE) argues that learning should be rooted in place, enabling students to understand natural, cultural, and social contexts through direct engagement rather than abstract textual learning (Gruenewald, 2003). Within the context of regional revitalization, localities should not be treated merely as objects of study, but as co-teachers in the learning process. Action strategies include:

1. Landscape Walks: Guided explorations that integrate walking, local storytelling, soundscapes, and narrative mapping to expose students to the embodied knowledge embedded in place (Ingold, 2011).

2. Oral History and Place-Based Narrative Inquiry: Students interview farmers, fishers, elders, returning youth, and local entrepreneurs to understand life histories and cultural memory, mitigating cultural misunderstandings rooted in outsider perspectives (Tuan, 1977).

3. Cultural Mapping: The co-production of food maps, faith maps, emotional maps, and risk maps that allow students to deepen their epistemic and affective engagement with place.

Drawing upon Freire's (1970) notion of learning within reality, Tuan's (1977) sense of place, and Ingold's (2011) "knowledge through walking," place should no longer be conceptualized as a passive backdrop but as an epistemic agent in the learning process. In Taiwan, for example, National Chiayi University's community design and development course employs orienteering as a pedagogical medium, enabling students to encounter communities through exploration, bodily engagement, and contextual interaction. These experiences help students shift from

merely seeing a locality to understanding it, entering the epistemological and phenomenological foundations necessary for regional revitalization. Such learning cultivates sensitivity to the lifeworld of place and nurtures the cultural awareness and social responsibility essential for future engagement in community-based revitalization.

3.2 Co-Creation with Community: A Bottom-Up Governance Model for USR Curriculum

Regional revitalization is not a top-down economic intervention but a collaborative process grounded in community-defined needs. When USR courses are designed solely by universities, they risk reproducing "academic colonialism" or "benevolent oppression," overlooking the rhythms and complexities of local lifeworlds (Santos, 2014). Action strategies include:

1. Co-design workshops: Bringing together students, community organizations, local governments, and faculty to define course themes, clarify role expectations, and establish ethical boundaries—operationalizing Levinas's (1969) ethics of the other.

2. Participatory action research (PAR): Utilizing cycles of problem–action–reflection that position students not as observers but as co-researchers (Jacoby, 2015).

3. Cross-sector platforms (university–community hubs): Establishing long-term collaborative infrastructures linking universities, local governments, NGOs, and local enterprises.

4. Community as co-teacher: Recognizing farmers, artisans, fishers, and cultural practitioners as co-producers of knowledge, thereby embracing Freire's (1970) dialogical pedagogy.

This governance model posits that universities are not rescuers of localities but partners in co-learning and co-action. For example, the USR team at National Chiayi University has collaborated with coastal communities in Budai Township to advance shoreline restoration, cultural archiving, and senior participation programs. This collaboration not only enhances students' understanding of local knowledge, environmental issues, and social challenges but also embodies the principles of knowledge democratization and educational localization (Tsai, 2024). In this sense, USR courses evolve from merely "intervening in" or "serving" communities to co-creating future capacities and sustainable visions with local residents. Universities and communities thus become a shared community of practice engaged in collective regeneration and future-making.

3.3 From Service to Public Action: Sustainability-Oriented Curriculum Ethics

Many USR initiatives remain confined to service-oriented activities that lack ethical reflection on local contexts and may inadvertently generate place-based trauma—including cultural misrepresentation, intrusive short-term interventions, community fatigue, or unfulfilled commitments. Therefore, USR curriculum design must be grounded in sustainability ethics, emphasizing responsibility, long-term engagement, and the avoidance of secondary harm. Specific strategies include:

1. Issue-based curriculum: Courses should be structured around authentic local issues—such as marine debris management, fishing-port transition, aging communities, or ecological restoration—encouraging students to move beyond merely *observing* problems to proposing feasible *micro-actions*.

2. Ethics of place module: Students critically examine whether their actions impose burdens on local residents, what constitutes "good accompaniment," and how to recognize local vulnerabilities and cultural differences—reflecting Levinas's (1969) ethical principle of responding to the Other.

3. Long-term anchoring mechanisms: Through year-long collaborations, interdepartmental partnerships, sequential project design, and local internships, student engagement shifts from one-off activities toward sustained community commitments.

This framework aligns with Biesta's (2010) notion of subjectification, which emphasizes the formation of students as autonomous,

responsible actors. Rather than passive "service providers," students become public actors capable of ethical judgment and collective action.

In Taiwan, National Chiayi University provides a compelling example. Faculty members have integrated coursework with community-based action programs, enabling students to develop long-term collaborative relationships with residents of Haomeili in Budai Township. Together, they engage in coastal restoration, environmental monitoring, and cultural documentation initiatives (Tsai, 2025). Through these sustained practices, students acquire not only substantive knowledge of local issues but also embodied action competence—concretely exemplifying Freire's (1970) principle of "learning within reality."

Moreover, environmental education has been systematically incorporated into general and interdisciplinary curricula, allowing students to analyze environmental contexts, identify sustainability challenges, and design actionable solutions. Faculty members also played a key advisory role in Haomei's successful bid for the 2024 National Environmental Education Award, where the community earned the prestigious *excellence* distinction (Tsai, 2025). This case illustrates how universities not only cultivate student subjectification but also serve as vital partners in local sustainability governance—embodying USR's commitments to public responsibility and place-based solidarity.

3.4 Glocalization: Positioning Local Issues within Global Sustainability Frameworks

One of the central principles of regional revitalization is that "the more local, the more global"—locality itself contains global significance (Robertson, 2000). Through glocalization-oriented curriculum design, USR programs can cultivate students' capacity to understand global sustainability challenges and navigate intercultural contexts. Effective strategies include:

1. SDG–Local Issue Alignment: Mapping local concerns onto global goals such as SDG 4 (educational equity in rural areas), SDG 11 (housing cultures and community spaces), SDG 12 (food systems and circular economy), and SDG 14 (marine debris and coastal governance).

2. Trans local comparison: Examining comparative cases—including Japan's regional revitalization, Nordic rural regeneration, and EU new localism—to reveal how local issues emerge within global political–economic structures.

3. Localization-to-internationalization through English and digital media: Developing English-language case studies, digital storytelling projects, and international presentations that translate local issues into globally communicable knowledge.

From Appadurai's (1996) perspective of global cultural flows, localities are not passive recipients of global forces; rather, they function as active nodes in the production of global knowledge, culture, and action. Far from being marginal, local practices and ways of life reshape global debates on sustainability, cultural continuity, and social resilience.

In this context, Vasilescu et al. (2010) argue that USR inherently involves strengthening civic commitment and social responsibility. Through curriculum-based community engagement and sustainability-oriented actions, students develop civic consciousness infused with global perspectives. USR, therefore, should not be understood merely as "serving the community," but as an educational endeavor that elevates local issues into global ethical and sustainability discourse.

Thus, USR courses possess the potential to function as local–global connectors: 1. Deepening students' understanding of local social, cultural, and environmental concerns; 2. While simultaneously integrating transnational comparison, global sustainability frameworks, digital narratives, and international exchange. In this way, universities become critical mediators of global knowledge flows—enhancing the visibility of local issues, generating global relevance for local practices, and cultivating students' competencies as global citizens.

4. Conclusion and Implications

This article has examined the philosophical foundations of regional revitalization and explored their implications for USR and curriculum design. Through literature analysis

and interdisciplinary theoretical integration, three key conclusions and three major implications emerge.

4.1 Conclusions

4.1.1 Regional revitalization is a philosophical project grounded in the lifeworld, not a technocratic policy tool

This study demonstrates that regional revitalization is not merely a policy label or an industrial strategy but a profound philosophical endeavor concerned with the reconstruction of the lifeworld. Its core dimensions include: 1. The reconstruction of place attachment and affective bonds (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977); 2. The regeneration of local vitality and creative capacities; 3. The revitalization and circulation of local resources and cultural memory (Ingold, 2011); 4. The critique of linear modernization and the imagination of alternative development pathways (Harvey, 2005); 5. The rebuilding of local ethics and the healing of place-based trauma (Levinas, 1969); 6. And the re-grounding of place-based knowing in embodied experience, aesthetics, and everyday life (Ingold, 2011).

Accordingly, the essence of regional revitalization is not to make rural places more like cities, but to pose fundamental philosophical questions: In what ways can a place exist? What constitutes the value of place? And how can humans and land re-establish an ethical, responsive relationship amidst structural crisis? Thus, regional revitalization is best understood as an integrated project of cultural philosophy, ethical philosophy, and the philosophy of life, rather than a policy mechanism.

4.1.2 USR must shift from a "project-oriented" to a "place-based" and "ethics-oriented" educational paradigm

Contemporary USR initiatives often default to short-term projects and performance-driven governance, resulting in "many activities but little action" (McIlrath et al., 2012). Drawing from Freire (1970) and Biesta (2010), this study argues that USR is fundamentally *educational*, not administrative. Three essential shifts are required: 1. From externally designed projects to lifeworld-based engagement: USR curricula must reflect the emotional, cultural, and historical dimensions of place rather than impose academic imaginaries or cosmetic interventions. Without understanding the local lifeworld, universities risk producing new forms of place-based trauma. 2. From teacher-centered design to community co-creation: In alignment with regional revitalization principles, USR must adopt co-creation, citizen participation, and PAR methodologies, grounded in long-term accompaniment (Santos, 2014; Jacoby, 2015). 3. From service learning to public action and subjectification: Following Freire (1970), students should be formed as praxis agents, and following Biesta (2010), education must support the emergence of the subject.
Thus, USR is not about "serving others," but about cultivating students as public actors capable of transformative action.

4.1.3 Regional revitalization and higher education should jointly construct an integrated model of "place, sustainability, and public action"

This study identifies four educational pillars that together constitute a comprehensive USR curriculum architecture: 1. Place as Teacher: Through field immersion, cultural narrative collection, and embodied learning, students develop place sensitivity and cultural awareness. 2. Co-creation with community: Co-design workshops, community co-teaching, and cross-sector partnerships shift the curriculum from "intervention" to "co-generation." 3. Sustainability ethics: To avoid local harm, curricula must foreground ethical reflection on action, integrate ESD principles, and engage students in situated moral reasoning. 4. Trans locality and SDGs: By linking local issues to global frameworks (e.g., SDGs), students develop dual "local–global" perspectives, embodying the idea that "the more local, the more global."

4.2 Implications

4.2.1 For higher education:

Universities must reclaim their public mission by shifting from technical, industry-

driven, project-based models to roles as ethical practitioners, co-creators of local futures, and facilitators of societal reflection.

4.2.2 For USR practice:

USR should move beyond service provision toward a philosophy of public action. As Freire (1970) argues, education must be emancipatory; and as Vallaeys (2014) contends, universities must become the committed university—institutions committed to social responsibility and ethical engagement.

4.2.3 For sustainable regional development:

While governments and industries play critical roles in revitalization, they risk reproducing developmentalist or short-term patterns. Higher education, by contrast, can contribute reflective, cultural, and community-oriented capacities—enabling places to regenerate, reimagine, and rebuild themselves as sustainable communities.

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