

FROM BRIDGING THE RURAL- URBAN DIVIDE TO BUILDING RURAL-URBAN INTERDEPEN- DENCIES

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INTRODUCTION

“The century of the city!” Such is the catchphrase read in a growing number of books and heard in conferences, international gatherings and political speeches. And this is not a groundless statement: in a hundred years, from 1950 to 2050, urbanites will have gone from 30 per cent to 66 per cent of our planet’s population.¹

This structural shift poses huge challenges for governments and civil society, as it implies new demographics, economics, social organisation, politics and relations with nature. Almost all of the shift is taking place in the global south, much of it in some of the poorest regions of the world. Because of this, there is a need to pay far more attention to what is going on, what the implications are for the present and the future, and what needs to be done to steer this tidal wave of change in a direction that can do the most good and the least harm for the majority of people, particularly poor and vulnerable people.

But there is also a danger of going in fundamentally wrong directions as we think and act upon this process of structural transformation. Yes, this is the century of the city, but to a significant extent it is one of the small and medium city and of rural-urban integration. It is the century of the city, but not the century of the megalopolis.

THE INVISIBLE SMALL CITY

Yes, the world has urbanised, but it has not done so exclusively or even mainly in large cities. In fact, 43 per cent of the world’s urban citizens live in locations of fewer than 300,000 people, and most of them live in towns with as little as 2,000 inhabitants, while an additional seven per cent live in cities of 300,000 to 500,000 people. This constitutes around 27 per cent of the world’s total population. The share of urban people in smaller cities and towns will stand at 45 per cent in 2030. The large and very large urban agglomerations of more than five million people that capture the imagination of people who speak or hear about the century of the city are where 20 per cent of urban people live, a proportion that will go up to 23 per cent in 2030.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all data in this article are taken from, or based on World Urbanization Prospects: The 2014 Revision, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, 2014.

These small cities are not a transitional feature of developing countries on their way from the village to the megalopolis. There are countries in the global north and south alike, such as Japan or South Africa, where urbanisation is highly concentrated in large and very large cities, but these are by no means representative of the overall global pattern. In the USA today there are 1.4 people living in small cities of under 500,000 people for every urbanite in a city of five million or more; the majority of them are in places where fewer than 300,000 people live. In Germany the proportion of people living in small cities to large cities is 6.2 to one, with the largest cities being in the category of one to five million inhabitants. Some highly developed countries, such as Denmark or Norway, do not have very large cities, and almost 80 per cent of their population lives in small cities of under 300,000 people. In some industrialised countries, such as South Korea, urbanites are roughly equally shared among very large and medium and small cities.

Regions with smaller cities are not only important in terms of the distribution of population; together, they also contribute much of the world's economic value. In member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the small number of regions with very large cities that account for 13 per cent of the population contribute 26 per cent of aggregate growth, while the regions with intermediate cities, such as Norfolk in the UK or Salamanca in Spain, with 75 per cent of the population, are responsible for 83 per cent of total growth. So yes, New York is hugely important to the American economy, but put together the regions around such places as Fresno or Saint Louis are even more important. Unfortunately, this analysis has only been done for OECD countries that have the required information available, but it is reasonable to think that in developing countries, which have economies that are more dependent on natural resources, the aggregate contribution of regions with smaller cities could be even more prominent.

THE NOT SO RURAL RURAL

Misconceptions also abound when thinking about the rural, a word that for most people and, more dangerously, for most policy-makers, equates with tiny, remote and isolated villages, people working the land, pervasive poverty or, at best, a bucolic 'Vangoghesque' image of sunlight, clean air and sweeping fields. Yes, there is still some of this, but the image is as distorted as if, when speaking about the urban, we would think about Charles Dickens' London.

The data are scarce and not as comparable across the different studies as would be necessary, but there is enough evidence to suggest that most rural people, perhaps as many as 80 per cent of them, live close to a city, and in the majority of cases this is a small city.

In studies in which I have participated, we found that in Colombia, one third of rural people live within a 10 km radius of a city of 25,000 or more inhabitants, and 94 per cent live within 30 km of one. In Mexico, two thirds of the rural population can travel for less than one hour to reach a city, and close to 90 per cent are only 90 minutes or less away.

A recent study, based on spatially referenced data sets for the different regions of the world, provides evidence that allows us to estimate that less than three per cent of the rural population in developing countries live in remote and isolated regions. In densely populated South Asia, it is less than half of one per cent, and in Sub-Saharan Africa, less than three per cent.²

THE RURAL – URBAN INTERFACE

So our planet is not one of a few hundred huge urban agglomerations and millions of tiny villages; approximately eight out of 10 people in the world, and slightly more than that in developing regions, live in small cities of fewer than 500,000 people and the surrounding and relatively close rural areas.

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These socio-spatial places, or territories, where most of us live and make our living, are precisely those most invisible to policy-makers and, I would argue, to civil society as well. We continue to think in terms of a dichotomous world of the rural, separate from and even contradictory with the urban, and this lens informs the ways that policy-makers and organised civil society act. We are designing policies and strategies for a world that exists largely in our imagination. Brazilian author Jose Eli da Veiga wrote about 'imaginary cities', and we could equally well refer to 'imaginary rural societies'.

The important question is whether small cities and the surrounding rural areas constitute functional rural-urban regions, or whether they are two distinct forms of social organisation that are basically unconnected to each other. The answer would seem to be quite obvious: farmers live in the village but sell in the nearby city or to traders based there; shop owners in the city have customers from the urban neighbourhood as well as from the nearby rural areas; urban women go to the countryside to work during the peak harvest season; and rural women make much of their income in non-farm jobs which often take place in the city or are based on urban customers. If an impenetrable wall was built around the city limits to prevent all movement of people and goods from one side to the other, both the city and the countryside would soon suffer the consequences. These people live, work and engage in social interaction in rural-urban functional territories; they are not 'urban' nor 'rural', in the same sense as someone living in Munich or in the village of Tiby in Mali: they are rural-urban or 'rurban' citizens.

In most of the developing world today it makes very little sense to continue to see 'urban' and 'rural' as a dichotomy of vastly distinct and separate spaces. In fact, we now know that there is a gradient from 'deep rural' places, to provincial regions that combine rural and urban attributes and locations, to the peri-urban areas in the shadows of medium to very large cities in the world, to primary cities and very large urban agglomerations. Moreover, all of these places are increasingly interlinked in networks and systems that combine functions and hierarchies. The distribution of people across these types of spaces is by no means static; it changes with development, the rate of urbanisation, and the degree to which the urban population is concentrated in one or two cities or is more distributed among a larger group of primary, secondary and tertiary cities.

While interlinked rural and urban areas and locations today appear to be the norm rather than the exception, it is important to distinguish between two different and large categories of rural-urban linkages. A first situation is that created by flows of

² 'Poverty and the Spatial Distribution of Rural Population', Edward B Barbier and Jacob P Hochard, Policy Research Working Paper 7,101, The World Bank, 2014.

people, goods, money and information, between City X and a very large number of indeterminate rural areas throughout a country or even the world. For example, mobile phones manufactured in the city of Shenzhen, in China, which has a population of over 10 million, will be shipped and used to facilitate trade and social relations in hundreds or thousands of villages in Africa and Asia. The food consumed in Lagos, with a population of 21 million, and the immigrants flowing into Lagos, comes from all over Nigeria, the region and the world, and not just from the proximate rural areas. The relationships between Shenzhen or Lagos, and the rural areas of their countries and indeed the world, are very diffuse.

A different story is that of the relations between a specific rural area and a particular urban location, developed through systematic and repeated flow of goods, services, people and money. Geographic proximity appears necessary for this kind of interaction. In this case, the flows of goods, services, money and people are much more diverse, and there is a stronger degree of reciprocal dependency between the rural and the urban components. This is so to such an extent that the urban centre and the rural hinterland can become integral components of a single rural-urban functional territory, often cutting across administrative boundaries.

In Mexico, Colombia and Chile, rural-urban territories involving one or more small and medium cities and a rural hinterland house 43 per cent, 38 per cent, and 37 per cent of the total population respectively, while 'deep rural' territories that lack an urban nucleus range have seven per cent, 16 per cent, and six per cent of the population. In Brazil, up to 3,400 rural and urban municipalities could be part of these rural-urban functional territories, involving 93 million people, 37 million of whom live in poverty.

THE RURAL – URBAN GAP

And yet, innumerable studies confirm that there are large gaps in well-being between rural and urban populations. The difference in access to education, health, electricity, clean water and sanitation services are as large as the differences in political participation, voice, representation and power. Monetary and non-monetary poverty are more widespread and more severe in rural than in urban societies.

The issue is how to address these gaps. One strategy has been to focus investments on the rural poor and in their communities, to 'bridge the rural - urban divide'. Goal 2 of the Sustainable Development Goals framework, for example, is an expression of this approach.

It is essential to insist on this strategy. As a matter of human rights, every person, regardless of place of residence, must have access to a set of services and enjoy a level of well-being that allows him or her to express his or her human potential to the fullest degree. However, the experience of many higher middle income countries shows that many of these gaps can be reduced significantly, but without a corresponding proportional effect being generated in the ability of rural people to have a stronger place and role in society. Closing the rural-urban gap in basic indicators of well-being is not enough to create more and better development opportunities for rural people.

ORGANISED CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE BUILDING OF RURAL-URBAN INTERDEPENDENCIES

In order to develop greater opportunities for rural people, there is a need to give more prominence to policies and strategies that enhance the linkages and interdependencies between rural areas and small and medium cities, within functional territories.

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These policies and strategies, of which territorial development is a prominent example, must of course involve public and private investments to improve the functioning of labour and product markets, the daily or short-term mobility of people from rural to urban to rural, and amenities, among others. There is a wealth of valuable experience in the work of organised civil society that can be of use to guide these investments so that they lead to sustainable and socially inclusive economic growth and development.

However, the crux of the problem is one of governance. A woman in a rural-urban territory may live her social life across the rural-urban boundary, but it is almost always the case that governments and policies segment and separate these functional territories. Urban development and rural development policies do not speak to each other, and therefore miss the multiple opportunities for coordination and synergies that would achieve greater impact. Some associations involving local governments from rural areas and the local government of the nearby city exist, but are the exception rather than the norm. They are needed to deal with a range of issues, including integrated water management, labour commuting, market facilities in the city for rural producers and amenities to retain young men and women in a region, thus reducing brain drain to the larger cities.

Organised civil society is the only force that can promote this change in governance systems, so that they match in much better ways the rural-urban lives of so many people who no longer identify themselves with the labels of the past. Governments, left to themselves, will continue to reproduce the rural-urban divide through so many actions, because political incentives are aligned that way. These incentives, which encourage path dependency, range from the criteria used to evaluate and compensate civil servants, to the maintenance of political clienteles and of powerful economic interests that capture certain policies or sets of policies, and the budgets and subsidies that come with them. This often happens, for example, with agricultural or infrastructure policies.

While incentives exist to continue doing more of the same, few incentives exist within governments and public legal and administrative regulations to encourage and reward cooperation and coordination across sectors, or levels or units of governments, such as districts within a province. Policy engagement to change governance systems, so that they fit the

new structural realities of these rural-urban societies, should be the top priority of those in organised civil society who are interested in closing the rural-urban divide through a strategy based on building rural-urban interdependencies.

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³ 'Inclusive Rural–Urban Linkages', Julio A Berdegué, Felicity J Proctor and Chiara Cazzuffi, Working Paper Series No. 123, Territorial Cohesion for Development Programme, RIMISP, Chile, December 2014, <http://bit.ly/1YnRyHx>.