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André Torre
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Regional Development in Rural Areas

Analytical Tools and Public Policies

 Springer

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Abstract Three main reasons require to look closely at rural areas and to analyse rural development and policies: they represent the major part of world's surface area; they are the object of strong competition between and within regions and countries; they contain almost all the resources necessary for human existence. They are therefore central to the public policies and strategies of interest groups and nations and their future is an inescapable issue on the agendas of policymakers, decision-makers and researchers. Nowadays rural areas are facing two fundamental types of change, suggesting that there is no longer a dominant model: they are subject to increasingly strong influence from cities and urban populations; competition for natural resources located in rural areas plays a key role in current development policies. The rural world appears as a mosaic of highly diverse socio-economic configurations and spatial distribution patterns, marked by a diversity of development paths, whereas public policies dedicated to rural development are undergoing important changes. The goal of the book is to provide tools for addressing the question of rural and peri-urban development, whether through analytical thinking or public policy development, on the basis of two distinct but overlapping approaches:—regional development approaches—especially regional science—on the one hand; and studies on rural dimensions and policies, on the other.

Keywords Local populations • Natural resources • Regional development • Regional science • Rural areas • Rural development policies

The move into the 21st century coincided with a rising awareness that over 50 % of the global population now lives in cities and that these may be the future of humanity; it might therefore seem surprising, and even irrelevant, to focus on issues pertaining to the development and future of rural areas. Yet three main reasons have prompted us to look closely at these areas and devote a book to an analysis of rural development and the policies associated with it:

- The first reason is that rural areas are constantly changing, represent the major part of world’s surface area—including 37.7 % of all agricultural land—and are home to approximately 3.4 billion inhabitants, i.e. 46 % of the global population (according to 2014 World Bank statistics¹), making them an essential player in the present and future of humanity and Earth;
- The second is related to the fact that they are characterized by high diversity between and within regions and countries; they are highly coveted and are the object of strong competition between nations and regions;
- The third is that they contain almost all the resources necessary for human existence, such as daily food, sources of energy, the metals and polymers necessary for manufacturing, and the oxygen they absorb. They are therefore central to the public policies and strategies of interest groups and nations.

Beyond the historic and central role they still play in terms of production volumes or population, rural areas have always been central to the future evolution of the planet, and are undoubtedly critical in terms of sustainable development for the future. This is evidenced by conflicts over questions of land ownership, and in particular by the massive land grabbing conducted in Africa by various countries (such as China) in the hope of being able to cultivate the acquired land and thus meet the food needs of their population, or in anticipation of future food crises. Another, less obvious, example is that of the tremendous demand for recreational and natural spaces by urban populations, or that of concerns for the future caused by rapid land consumption and artificialization. A further example still is that of the debates on the future of the Amazon region, which is not only the green lung of the planet and a biodiversity reserve, but is also an extraordinary reservoir of mineral and agricultural resources for the populations of the Americas and beyond.

The future and development of rural areas are thus inescapable issues on the agendas of policymakers, decision-makers and researchers—issues which require thorough analysis and prospective studies followed by appropriate development policies. This is precisely the subject of this book, which aims to review the approaches to territorial and regional development in rural and peri-urban areas, together with related policies and their respective scopes.

1.1 The Profound Transformation of Rural Areas Leads to Fuzzy Representations and Boundaries

Discussing issues related to rural areas often leads the reader—and the general public even more so—into the realm of dreams and fantasy. It is difficult to have an objective and serene perception of these places and their human or non-human populations because of the imaginary dimension surrounding them. Very different

¹<http://data.worldbank.org/topic/agriculture-and-rural-development>.

and sometimes strongly opposing views confront one another, relayed by the media or public authorities, who are looking for simple and powerful images to convey essential values or particular messages.

A number of successful popular movies, such as *Babe* and *Into the Wild* reflect this opposition and present extreme views of the rural world, depicted in some cases as a gigantic farm, in others as a natural space of freedom, both magical and wild, and in others as a remote, backward—and even barbaric—other world, as in the movie *Deliverance*, for example.² These representations have proved to be influential. In an interesting overview, Halfacree (1993) listed a number of terms synonymous with “rural”, or rather what he calls “spatial imaginaries”, and which all correspond to various fantasized representations of those spaces. Indeed, the words and phrases *countryside*, *wilderness*, *outback*, *periphery*, *farm belt*, *village*, *hamlet*, *bush*, *peasant society*, *pastoral*, *garden*, *unincorporated territory*, *open space*, among others, refer to different and sometimes conflicting conceptions of rural land, and contribute to the view that these areas are fragmented and somehow difficult to capture and define.

Thus, if “the rural” presents an image that is simultaneously seductive and blurred, it is undoubtedly because it refers to a collective imaginary, and reminds each of us of our roots, or those of our ancestors: we all come from this world. But, especially today, it is also because “the rural” is an evolving world, subject to constant and sometimes contradictory changes. More specifically, *rural areas are facing two fundamental types of change that have slowly but surely disrupted the order of forests and meadows, which for so long seemed eternal and immutable.*

1. *Rural areas are subject to increasingly strong influence from cities and urban populations*

Modern cities contribute 80 % of the global GDP, occupy 3 % of the world’s land area, consume 75 % of its natural resources, and account for 60–80 % of global greenhouse-gas emissions. Cities are essentially concentrations of people who do not produce their own means of subsistence, therefore representing a concentrated demand for food, and appear to be strongly connected to rural and peri-urban areas and their inhabitants. Agriculture is crucial for these cities with regard to food input and recycling processes, especially in developing countries: the question of food sovereignty is high on the agenda for public policies and policymakers, and raises the question of the sustainability of current food supply chains

²*Babe*, a film by Chris Noonan, released in 1995, depicts an idyllic farm where a pig promised to slaughter manages to build an individual destiny by taking responsibility for the herd of sheep belonging to its owner. It responds to a vision of an agricultural rural world. By contrast, *Into the Wild*, a Sean Penn film released in 2007, shows a young man who goes into nature in order to achieve happiness in isolation and return to the wilderness. It responds to a naturalist and essentialist view of the countryside. *Deliverance*, a John Boorman film released in 1972, recounts the escapades of city dwellers whose trip on a river turns into a nightmare and reveals their unsuitability to both natural places and their inhabitants. All three are based on very successful books (Dickey 1970; King-Smith 1984; Krakauer 1996).

for urban populations. Urban residents appreciate the potential of rural areas in terms of opportunities for tourism or nature activities, and wish to preserve parts of these areas or turn them into recreation zones.

At the same time, and somewhat paradoxically, urban sprawl leads to massive consumption of agricultural land, whose quality makes it attractive for development. Ultimately, urban growth has given rise to peri-urbanization phenomena: city peripheries are increasingly made up of spaces that can be described as partially urbanized, and mostly result from an interpenetration of residential areas, transport infrastructure, natural areas, gardens and farmland. The term “rural” must now be considered alongside the term “peri-urban” in order to define areas where there are various degrees of interpenetration of city and country, but without a clear distinction between the two.

As a consequence, the countryside has gradually lost its traditionally dominant role, becoming a mere equal to cities, and is now dependent on the development, preferences and potential demand of urban areas. Where rural growth occurs, it is due to the expansion of nearby cities or more long-distance urban demand for rural products, such as rural tourism and experiences. This has important implications for rural development policies. Traditional rural resources, arable land and growing forests are used for the production of agricultural and wood products in industries that employ fewer and fewer people. In the global, urban knowledge economy, other resources are necessary for the development of the countryside. Most importantly, in developed countries, the resources that now matter are no longer those necessary for primary production but those that can provide an attractive living and leisure environment, and that have development potential for the residential, tourism and experiential industries. New urban–rural relations are not primarily based on the biological need to get food, wood for building houses, or fuel to cook or to heat houses. Instead, they are mainly based on *social* needs and demands.

2. Competition for natural resources located in rural areas, including land, plays a key role in current development policies and will determine the future strategic development of these areas

This intense competition has its origins in both populations’ behaviours and the characteristics of the areas in question. With regard to the former, urban residents’ desire for nature and for new spaces for tourism and recreation leads them to covet rural land, for holiday or conservation purposes or to transform them into tourist areas. Meanwhile, the extraordinary amounts of resources present in these areas suggest that they are highly demanded consumer goods. Two main categories of resources are in demand: first of all, the land itself, over which different types of land users compete; this applies to agricultural areas and forests, as well as zones intended for housing, transport infrastructure or industrial facilities. Second, areas beneath the land surface are also very much sought after, for the water and extractive resources they contain.