

Editorial

Diversity and Opportunities for Rural Development: Reflecting Awareness, Understanding and Activities in Rural Areas

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What does rural development policy aim to achieve, and how does it go about it? The answer to this simple question might seem obvious; however, the careful reading of the papers in this Special Issue collection perhaps suggests several different answers and points to some subtle shifts over time. Figure 1 is an attempt to represent the main dimensions of this diversity and the broad direction of evolution.

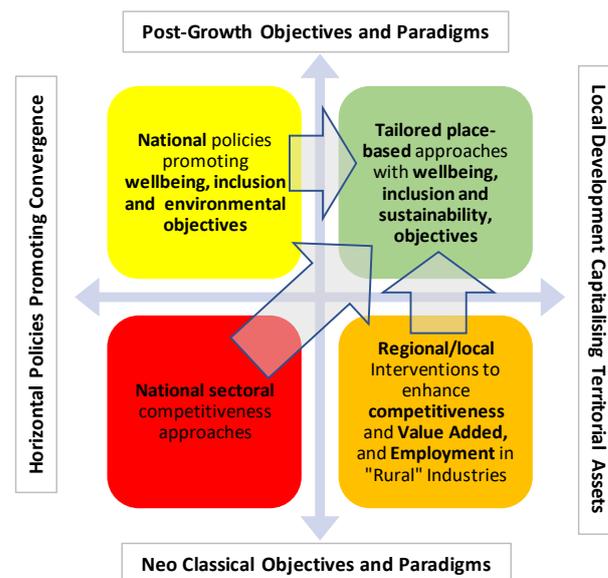


Figure 1. Key axes of diversity and evolution in rural development paradigms and practice.

Firstly, and represented by the horizontal axis, is the distinction between the following:

- National policies with “top down” paradigms, which aim to promote convergence between rural and urban areas;
- More locally based activities, which capitalise on the full range of local territorial resources, from conventional fixed and economic assets to social, cultural, and environmental capital (biodiversity).

Secondly, it is helpful to distinguish between the following:

- Interventions founded upon a neoliberal, free market view of the development process, where success is quantified in terms of competitiveness and “hard” economic metrics;
- Approaches that focus upon less tangible, difficult to quantify, and “post-growth” outcomes, such as well-being, inclusion, or sustainability.



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The quadrants defined by these two axes specify a four-fold classification of rural development approaches. In very broad terms, over the last decade or more, the observable trend in many developed countries has been to shift towards the top-right quadrant; in other words, away from exogenous, neoliberal approaches towards tailored, place-based approaches emphasising well-being, inclusion, and sustainability goals. This characterisation inevitably involves the oversimplification of some important details. We will now attempt to sketch out this narrative from the perspectives of changing goals, theories and concepts, configurations of decision-making power, shifts in approaches to monitoring and evaluation, and the associated literature.

At the turn of the century, and for at least the first decade, aspiring to enhanced productivity and quantitative economic performance was the dominant societal action pattern in pursuit of rural development. It was assumed to provide a pathway for convergence, through which less-developed countries and marginal/remote regions might narrow the economic performance gap between them and benchmark urban areas, whether nearby or distant. During this period, market liberalisation and state retrenchment were preferred solutions. All too often, however, the original concern for spatial balance and social as well as territorial coherence was lost sight of. Terms such as “balance” and “convergence”, used in policy statements, were always at risk of being reduced to buzzwords for legitimisation purposes. Ironically, although for some decades after the Second World War substantial regional convergence was observed, from the 1980s onwards “geographical inequalities in economic prosperity and social conditions have widened” [1] (p. 5).

Coincidentally, it was in the same period that rural development programmes, previously a feature of developing countries, where they evolved as a response to the realisation that agricultural modernisation alone would not suffice, and that more wide-ranging as well as fundamental restructuring of local and regional economies was required, gained recognition as a discrete policy task in the developed world [2]. Here, they were reinforced by a rising awareness of the environmental pressures, as well as the social and community implications, of increasingly intensive agricultural and forestry practices. In a European context it was hoped that a forward-looking perspective [3] could support diversification activities, rooted in the sociocultural legacy of rural places, supported by “integrated”, or at least “dedicated”, policies for rural regions.

Increasingly, in the new century, innovative approaches to rural development sought to build upon the inherent strengths of rural localities, enhancing the specific, often unique, amenities of places. A host of programmes, initiatives, and networks inspired multifarious activities. These were captured and formalised via the use of a refreshed lexicon of terminology, such as “niche production”, “territorial branding”, “added value”, “diversification”, “integration”, “multifunctionality”, “short value chains”, “circular economy”, “endogeneity”, and above all “place-based” as well as “place-sensitive” approaches. Sustainability goals were acknowledged by incorporating support for renewables and the circular economy. Community resilience and the role of social capital were nurtured through participatory approaches, informed by burgeoning literature on social ecology [4], communities, and social capital (contribution three).

The “New Rural Paradigm”, as popularised by the OECD [5], provided a synthesis of these changes, but also acted as a blueprint for the continuing evolution of rural policy. Included in the ambition of this new concept was the increasing use of cross-sectoral local action, addressing a range of economic, social, cultural, and environmental issues in a rural context. A considerable gap between knowledge and action, and a lack of decisive power relations, at various spatial scales, were encountered [6], and the need for a greater emphasis on the role of place in policy assessments was a constraint to effective change [7].

Over the past two decades, rural development research and policy reform have advanced quickly, not only in the industrialized world but also in developing countries. Since context conditions, development paths, concepts and approaches, institutional support, programmes, and assessment perspectives are very diverse, providing a comparative overview is challenging. Furthermore, the internal diversity within countries (and regions)

implies the inherent need for place-sensitive strategies in recognition of uneven spatial development. Thus, Van der Ploeg et al. identify substantial differences between the dominant rural development concepts of the European Union (nurturing environmental and social externalities), China (protecting rural peasant agriculture from urban demands for labour and global competition) and Brazil (combating poverty) [8]. (It is worth noting, however, that their analysis presupposes a sectoral, rather than a territorial, concept of rural development, and that the “nested” markets that they identify as key responses to globalised “food empires” are described mainly within an economic framework).

Moreover, what has been dubbed the “emerging rural development agenda” [9] is more than a passive adaptation to diversity. It is a pushback against a complex array of drivers and trends, which collectively mainstream a unidirectional trajectory; the quest for efficiency, market competitiveness, standardization, and uniformity forces synonymous with globalization, which have been, despite some time lags in rural areas, underpinned by the digital transition [10]. Modernisation, technological adaptation, and globalisation are rated as the key requirements for overcoming persisting divides between rural and urban areas. Despite the huge potential of these changes, these globalising forces need to be challenged by alternative concepts that convey meanings for the specificity, local embeddedness, and uniqueness of local areas. As Doreen Massey argues in her groundbreaking plea “for space” [11], only a counter-position that allows flexibility and diversity in the objectives and processes shaping future activities in rural areas could be a sound basis for a meaningful policy response.

Cognisant of the new dimension of changes and the urgency of transformations due to the challenges of climate change, economic crises, and related inequalities, Marsden et al. [9] (p. 21) perceive the need to prioritise the analysis of “new geographies of empowerment and association in rural areas”. While they argue that rural development “could . . . obviate many of the destructive and unsustainable cosmopolitan forces” [9] (p. 25), the current trajectories of rural development might also represent places of exclusiveness, but also “of a new socio-cultural ecological enlightenment—a place for the potential re-creation and empowerment of social autonomy and participatory community [12]” [8] (p. 24f).

The more that globalisation was advocated as the sole, and inevitable, trajectory for all places in the world, the more evident the need for, and the difficulty in achieving, convergence between rural areas and urban agglomerations became. Research (and policy) responded to the rising challenges by extending analyses to many detailed aspects that influence social, economic, and ecological change. Reviews of the long-term content, intensity, and focus of rural research show a quantitative increase in discourse and the size of the research community. Initially, three aspects—natural resource divergencies, the concentration of capital, and the cost of mobility of goods as well as services—were central. Since the turn of the century, an increased concern for diversity as well as resilience issues, the negative externalities of rural policies, and an interest in the effects of migration flows from and to rural areas has been observed [13].

In a recent comprehensive review of journals, categories, authors, and references since the 1950s, Lu and de Vries [14] revealed the increasing mobilisation of scholars from a variety of research fields and the rising popularity of interdisciplinary methods. The proliferation of relevant research articles, particularly over the last four decades, materialised, in the 1980s, in the launching of the two most significant journals in the field (*Journal of Rural Studies*, and *Land Use Policy*). A number of other journals specifically dedicated to rural areas (such as *Sociologia Ruralis*) demonstrated an increase in attention “to the social and geographic aspects of rural issues” [14] (p. 8). The diverse research fields involved in conducting rural research are revealed by edited volumes (“handbooks”) that aimed to cover the broad scope of relevant themes [15,16].

In all of these aspects of conceptualizing rural research, exploring issues of cultural representation, nature and sustainability, and social as well as spatial relations, the demand for understanding processes of change has increased in the last decade. Change is not defined simply as an outcome to be observed and analysed. Understanding the influence

of various actors, at different scales, is crucial. Coping with demographic change (often population decline), economic transformation, fundamental changes to food systems, issues of inequality (including rural poverty), institutional capacity (often weak in rural areas), and a lack of local power are recurrent priorities.

Although there are, of course, important issues common to rural areas, it is very important to resist the allure of simplistic unilateral explanations and one-dimensional diagnoses. A research strategy that supports a “renaissance of rural regions” through balanced territorial development thus requires a cross-sectoral analysis of the complex array of alternative development options [17]. From a research perspective, although systems approaches have enjoyed increasing popularity within economics, geography, and social as well as ecological sciences, the boundaries of the interconnections considered within these perspectives often remain circumscribed by discipline, taking in only a subset of the wider territorial system. More radically, the concept of “complex adaptive assemblages” [18] aims to “connect the multitude of different systems that all contribute to a particular object, practice, economy, person” [18] (p. 2). The policy implications of this are huge, pointing to the need to enhance relationships, connections, and flows of information, as well as translating this into practice.

The thorough understanding and balanced assessment of the socioecological system of specific rural areas that this implies will also necessitate awareness of unique local path/context-dependent phenomena. Such place-specific understanding can be nurtured via a reversal in customary policy–actor relationships [2], involving careful listening to the aspirations, ideas, and ambitions of local stakeholders, in addition to the creative use of participatory approaches, to support the emergence of genuinely “emancipatory rural politics” [19]. This kind of research discourse will have important implications for policy design and reform, although there is always a risk that the learning/application process may be hampered by “policy inertia”, “lock-ins”, and powerful “path dependencies” [7].

Assessing rural policy impacts has, so far, been one of the weak points in rural development studies and practice. Monitoring and evaluation aim to prove the relevance and effectiveness of policy programmes; however, long-term analyses and comprehensive policy/systems studies point to rather meagre effects [20]. The discontent increasingly felt by many rural people, stakeholders, politicians, and analysts has also affected leading international institutions. Calls to open-up policy assessment to “well-being” [21] and other alternative frameworks are widespread, in addition to gaining in detailed methodological as well as practical advice [22]. This is far beyond traditional concepts of rural development, acknowledging the shift from natural-resource-based activities towards a more diversified rural economy. To some extent, this conceptual change resonates with alternative views on social organisation and territorial priorities as expressed in different parts of the world. The recognition of concepts such as “buen vivir” [23], “Sumak kawsay” [24], “Ubuntu” [25], or “Satoyama” [26] has legitimised alternatives to neoliberal development pathways. In developed countries especially, fundamental concerns about the real effects of rural policy are also challenging (often implicit) assumptions about goals, suggesting that “no business as usual” is possible anymore [27]. Sadly, this leads some long-term observers of rural development action to question progress and the extent to which lessons have been learned [28].

Recent analyses have revealed that, in repeating these narratives, we replicate stereotypes that are not accurate as well as being highly reductionist, simplifying the predicament into a linear theoretical concept. There seems to be a pressing need to rethink rural development and to address the rising challenges due to changes in regional economics linked to large-scale global shifts in the economy and society. It is also timely to overcome the bias in theory building presented above that favours efficiency, competitiveness, growth, and spatial concentration. In an era of global ecological and economic crises, the need to also view rural regions as interesting sites of incredible experimentation, innovation, and resistance becomes central for meaningful place-based strategies and rural policies.

We have attempted to convey a flavour of the main dimensions of change in rural development concepts and practice which have characterised the first two decades of the twenty-first century. The initial shift from linear, reductionist, and sectoral explanations underpinned by neoliberal economic theory, to a more holistic territorial understanding, is ever widening in terms of its diagnosis of systemic processes, goals, and legitimate policy tools, as well as deepening with respect to the weight it gives to the local specificity of both challenges and potential. These trajectories are in part a reflection of the great challenges facing the world: globalisation, climate change and reduced biodiversity, short-term economic crises, and a growing awareness of spatial inequalities. They also provide grounds to question the bias in the theory-building of the twentieth century that almost exclusively favoured efficiency, competitiveness, growth, and spatial concentration. Rural regions have become environments of experimentation and innovation.

The articles published in this Special Issue indicate some aspects of the shifting discourse, although they cannot, of course, provide a full coverage of all the relevant themes of transformation. From his long-term research experience across various continents, Anthony Fuller presents, in his opinion paper, insightful reflections on changing research priorities and design, as well as on the evolution of rural studies at the micro- and macro-level (contribution five). His focus highlights the need to take into account shifts at the micro-level, in particular advancing discussions of agri-rural evolution and farm household practices, in very different spatial contexts, requiring qualitative methods with which to address the full range of drivers and lessons. A strong interest in different conceptual approaches and theoretical foundations is also evident in Shahraki's article (contribution two), which posits a new paradigm for achieving "rural prosperity" founded upon three dimensions: post-neoliberalism, sustainability pathways, and an appreciation of rural embodiment. This view is presented as "universal in nature" and relevant for new conceptualisations of rurality and the rural environment in any part of the world. It points to those issues that have been neglected in the mainstream discourse (such as a focus on competitiveness, integration and technological innovation), and postulates that future rural development strategies should "transcend pure productivism" (Shahraki 2022, 159).

The increasing concern about uneven urbanization and rural shrinkage is acknowledged at the outset of many rural policy programmes in Europe and the US. Nevertheless, shrinking rural regions have only recently been explicitly addressed as a distinct geographical category for analysis and policy. Copus and Dax investigated the theoretical background of rural shrinkage and explored the recent rural development practices of five European countries with dedicated policy schemes for rural regions in population decline (contribution four). Though concrete policy instruments and regional activities are quite distinct, the article underpins important similarities and differences in those national approaches. In particular, it reveals the urgency for a qualitative change in rural policy, abandoning the EC's Lisbon-Agenda-inspired vision of "rural competitiveness and cost-effectiveness" in favour of the pursuit of "well-being, rights to basic services, and more (spatially) inclusive rural development" (Copus and Dax 2022, 938).

Such a shift demands, in particular, judicious support for the development of rural social capital. The analysis of social innovation practices in marginal areas of Europe carried out by Slee, Lukesch, and Ravazzoli suggest very positive impacts in specific places and within specific sectors as well as groups (contribution three). Usually evolving in "response to a crisis of existing modes of provision of a service", such innovations require "good alignment and trust between civil society actors, municipal and public policies" and thrive "where bridging agencies provide a nurturing and supportive context" (Slee et al., 255). Even if conceptual and definitional uncertainty are considerable as well as persistent, such processes enable "new ways of thinking and doing, potentially capable of delivering enhanced societal well-being and sustainability where other institutions have struggled and/or failed" (Slee et al., 2022, 256).

The crucial role of social capital in community cooperation and development is also emphasized in Twikirize and Spitzer's article analysing social work in the East African

countries of Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda (contribution six). In this context, social work is especially challenged by the “big lack in the provision of welfare services” (Twikirize and Spitzer 2022, 1064). Here, the specific context of cultural settings and community structures are particularly important in the elaboration of locally adapted policies for marginalized rural areas.

This point is not exclusively applicable to less-advanced regions. A focus on local context is also at the core of the article by Berriet-Sollicie, Lapostolle, Lépiciier, and Mangin who present a new transdisciplinary research experiment for local communities in transformation processes in France (contribution one). Their starting point is their dissatisfaction with previous concepts and models “based mainly on consumerism and the accumulation of wealth”, which “have shown their limits in a context of social and ecological transition” (Berriet-Sollicie et al., 2022, 69). Even if such experimental projects are currently rare, they might provide inspiring examples of the kind of transitions needed as responses to current crises, demonstrating an ability to adapt to local specificities and the particular needs of remote areas. The authors also make the point that local commitment has to be matched by top-down support, in addition to integration into wider regional policy structures.

The issue of (spatial) justice within local/community development strategies, such as the EU LEADER programme, has received increasing attention in recent years [29], and the penultimate paper (contribution seven) in this Special Issue contributes to this debate. Lengerer, Haartsen, and Steinführer focus on the LEADER programme, exploring the issue of justice in the context of the elaboration of effective and place-adapted LEADER strategies. The final article, by Kah, Martinos, and Budzich-Tabor (contribution eight), presents the implementation of the community-led local development (CLLD) scheme in its first application period (2014–2020) across the EU. It reveals the diversity of national approaches to the use of local development instruments, utilising different Structural Funds and implying very different conceptual frameworks. This prompts further discussions concerning priorities, the future development of such strategies, and the assessment of outcomes.

The papers thus relate to a range of emerging challenges and draw on a wealth of empirical material, including the specific roles of resource use, climate change adaptation, farm management changes as well as small farm contributions, the non-agricultural economy, tourism potential, social innovation and community participation, institutional development, governance issues as well as the role of the state, and policy assessment. The discussions embodied in these papers address, from diverse perspectives, both the theoretical discourse and practical aspects of rural policy design, implementation, and assessment.

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