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Rural–urban interaction and development in Africa

Kenneth Lynch

Introduction

This chapter sets out to reunite thinking about urban and rural areas in the study of development across the continent of Africa. It will discuss briefly past approaches to understanding development and rural–urban relations, arguing that there is a need to reconnect these two spaces in a profound way. For example, development studies – both theoretical and empirical – are often based on the premise that there is a clear distinction between the urban and the rural. However, this distinction has been challenged. There is research in Africa on ‘rural’ activities such as agriculture in ‘urban’ spaces (Lynch *et al.*, 2013), urban activities such as industry in rural spaces (Bryceson, 2002; see also Bryceson, Chapter 27, this volume), and changes taking place at the interface between urban and rural spaces, and on the increasing interdependence between these two realms (Iaquinta and Drescher, 2002; McGregor *et al.*, 2002; Tiffen, 2003). There is therefore a need to bring these disparate themes together. However, before embarking on a discussion of continent-wide trends, a note of caution: the data demonstrate a disparate set of patterns and trends. While 22.5 per cent of Chad’s population is urban, this figure stands at 70.7 per cent in Algeria. While eastern Africa has an urbanisation level of 25.8 per cent, it is 51.6 per cent in northern Africa, 61.6 per cent in southern Africa and 45.1 per cent in western Africa (UN-Habitat, 2016). Similar variation exists in urbanisation rates. However, Potts (2008) cautions that much has been written about trends in sub-Saharan Africa based on questionable data that has been aggregated into received wisdom about trends that closer investigation reveals are questionable or at best may only be partially appropriate. So while this chapter sets out to identify some patterns, it is important to bear in mind the variation across the continent, between regions, and between countries across regions.

Theoretical reflections

Some of the earliest research on development focused on modernisation diffusion that explored the relations between city and countryside in the context of models of core–periphery, in the case of Friedman’s (1966) core–periphery model or Vance’s (1970) mercantile model. These influential theories are primarily focused on settlement hierarchies rather than the interaction between town and country, suggesting an urban focus; however, they are used to theorise about rural–urban interaction. Although not the originator of this concept, Lipton (1977, 1993) made considerable impact on development studies later, presenting a thesis on the ways in which urban-based industrialisation policies can have an adverse impact on the development of rural areas. After Lipton, a number of studies looked into Lipton’s ideas of urban bias, some agreeing that urban bias undermined rural development, some arguing that the distinction between urban and rural areas was rather crude and did not reflect the complex reality (Corbridge and Jones, 2005; Bezemer and Headey, 2007). More recently, however, the question of the distinction between urban and rural development is being questioned. This questioning has been particularly strong in the field of demography and migration studies. The impact of the economic crises of the 1980s has also prompted research on the differentials between cities and the rural areas (Potter *et al.*, 2008). Continued urban growth has prompted concerns about the environmental impacts on the countryside (Potter *et al.*, 2008). This is illustrated – bearing in mind Potts’ (2008) reservations about continent-wide data – in the developing trend of growing urban populations depicted in Figure 30.1. This chart illustrates the dramatic growth that appears to be taking place in both urban and rural parts of the continent, but the growth of the urban population is predicted to have grown from 200 million in 1950 to over 500 million by 2000, and will reach more than 900 million and exceed the rural population by 2036. Governments of the continent are aware of this trend, and have been working to tackle the challenges it presents. Examples include regional development initiatives based on small towns (Roberts, 2014; Roberts and Hohmann, 2014) and analysis emphasising the importance of maximising rural–urban interaction for development. These disparate critiques have begun to coalesce into a stronger body of research in recent years, though the gathering transition of populations across the developing world into more urban-based populations has meant a greater focus on livelihoods.

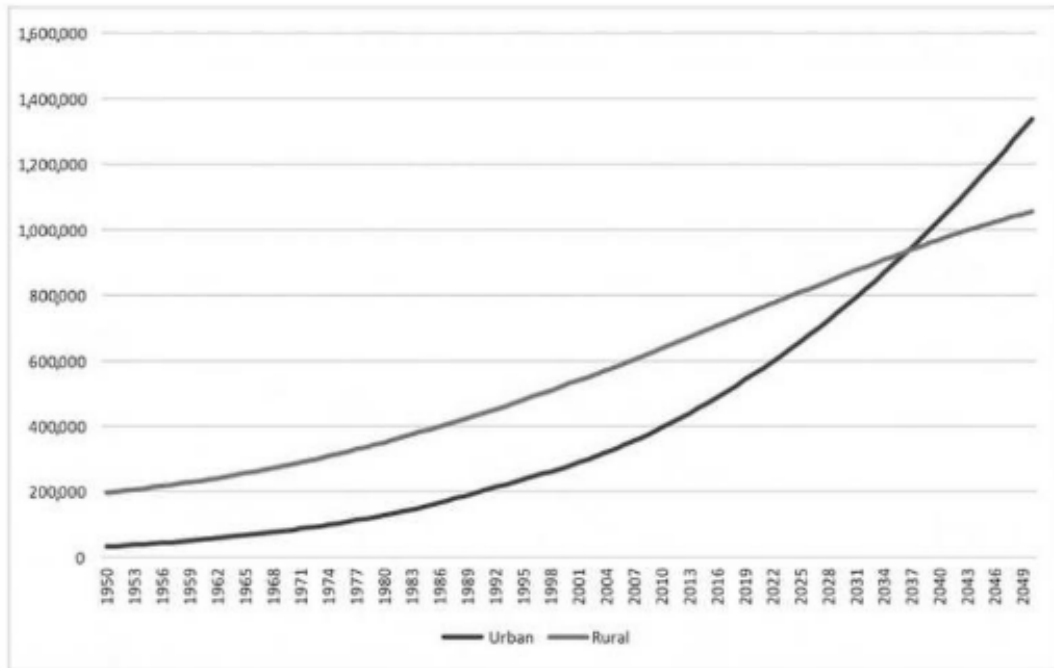


Figure 30.1 Urban and rural population trends in Africa, 1950–2050

Source: Adapted from UN (2014).

This argument does not necessarily break new ground, but proposes the collation of a wide range of research and theory that has relevance for this question of interactions between urban and rural areas. This is proposed within a broader context of research trends that appear to be moving away from the study of the physical interface between urban and rural, to conceiving of the relationships between them as more important. This is even the case in recent approaches to the peri-urban interface where rural and urban come into contact (Tacoli, 1998). Even in the physical space where the urban and the rural meet, there is an emerging consensus that the physical location of these linkages is less important than the way they are constructed and structured (Stephens, 2000; McGranahan and Satterthwaite, 2002). There is evidence that major international organisations, as well as local NGOs, are moving in a similar way in a realisation that practically, as well as theoretically, the urban and the rural need to be considered alongside each other (see Table 30.1). This chapter therefore proposes a focus on flows between urban and rural areas. This encourages a consideration of goods, people and ideas across the interface between cities and the countryside.

In spite of the challenge of fluidity and fragmented identities that play a role in the lives of the people who communicate, exchange and travel the links that bridge the urban–rural divide, a key contention is that this fluidity is often a deliberate strategy by people living in rural and urban areas in order to maximise their livelihood opportunities. This focus on flows and linkages is about the links between the areas rather than the structures or processes that separate them. This provides more useful and more powerful analysis of the relationships between city and countryside. Many of these linkages are developed in more detail elsewhere (Lynch, 2005), but this chapter will focus briefly on some of the overarching themes.

Table 30.1 International activities focusing on rural–urban links

<i>Organisation</i>	<i>Activity</i>	<i>Weblinks</i>
IIED	International Institute for Environment & Development, urban–rural linkages research	www.iied.org/urbanisation-rural-urban-linkages
UN-Habitat	Promoting rural–urban linkages; Conference in Nairobi, October 04 Bibliography.	www.unhabitat.org/HD/hdv5n1/contents.htm www.unhabitat.org/interlinkages_conf.asp
IFPRI	International Food Policy Research Institute, rural–urban linkages programme	www.ifpri.org/program/rural-urban-linkages
USAID Urban	Promoting linkages between cities, towns and rural areas for development	https://urban-links.org/
RUDI	Rural Urban Development Initiative, Tanzania; private sector initiative focused on connecting small rural enterprises and communities	www.rudi.or.tz/
FAO Food for the Cities	Food and Agriculture Organization; food links research, publications and policy recommendations	www.fao.org/fcit/fcit-home/en/

Recent trends and reflections

The rapid population growth of Third World cities gives rise to concerns about the changing nature of the relationship between urban and rural. The evidence for this is in a recently growing number of publications, research reports and policy documents of international organisations, which emphasise key development concepts such as decentralisation (see also Table 30.1). The UNDP (2017) estimated that the world’s urban population had reached 4 billion by 2015, accounting for 54 per cent of the global total. This is an increase on 30 per cent in 1950, and it is likely to go 66 per cent urban by 2050. During this period, Africa’s urban population grew by between 3.24 and 3.55 per cent per annum.

One of the key departures from previous approaches is that a focus on flows presents the possibility for each flow to work in either direction. Under certain conditions, one-way flows may dominate or the emphasis may change over time or from one context to the next. The flows of people, food and natural flows are more visible and tangible. Money and ideas are less tangible and involve service sectors in delivery, and so are less obvious. One of the main limitations in discussing rural–urban linkages is that it immediately represents city and countryside as being clearly separate. This ignores more problematic issues such as the definitions of the rural–urban interface, where distinctions between city and countryside can become blurred. Another important theme is the role of intermediate settlements.

Many major world developments have been linked to the relations between urban and rural realms. For example, according to Owens (2010), in Dar es Salaam there is a long history of links between the city and the rural origin areas of the population. He points out that there is growing evidence that over history, there are patterns of living and households that defy conventional views of linear rural-to-urban movement. This evidence finds instances of circular, stepwise and constant back and forth movement – particularly in southern Africa, where historical government controls and migrant labour patterns kept the labour moving in search of employment. Although there is an expectation that gradual emerging permanence develops, there is evidence that migration is sporadic and episodic, subject to the vagaries of the economics and political instabilities of the country and at an international level. Owens (2010) suggests that the evidence from Dar es Salaam shows that this maintenance of identification with the rural origin location serves to resist proletarianisation, and this is reinforced by migrants returning for cultural festivals and key family events, such as births, weddings or funerals. The way in which mobility is utilised and rurally based cultural identities retained in the city also

provides cultural and social capital. For example, particular ethnic groups may specialise in transporting and wholesaling particular rurally produced commodities. See, for example, van Donge (1994) on Waluguru vegetable traders in Tanzania, Gervais-Lambony (2012) on Mina traders in Togo, and FAO (2012) on maguevas, or female traders who buy crops direct from growers' fields, for markets in Maputo and Matola in Mozambique.

While the Tanzanian example illustrates a deliberate approach of exploiting the relationships between the urban and rural areas, Hodder (2000) argues that inevitably, rural agricultural sectors and urban industrial sectors play strategic roles in each other's development. He identifies six key reasons for these close links between the two sectors:

- 1 Agriculture depends on manufactured goods for both the transformation of agriculture (such as farm tools, machinery, inputs) and for consumer goods that are in demand as agricultural incomes rise (such as radios and bicycles).
- 2 As agriculture incorporates more technology in its activities, labour becomes a less significant factor. More technologically advanced agriculture releases capital and labour that move into the urban industrial sector.
- 3 Agriculture provides raw materials for some industries, such as tobacco, cotton and sisal.
- 4 Agriculture for export can earn foreign exchange, which is important for purchasing items that are vital to industrial processes. These include commodities such as petroleum, chemicals and technology that are not produced locally.
- 5 There is an important balance to be struck in incomes, prices and taxation between the urban and the rural areas. For example, high food prices provide rewards to farmers and incentives to increase production, but may mean high prices in urban areas, and can lead to poverty and unrest. Taxation in the agricultural sector may be necessary to raise revenues to finance public expenditure, but this may act as a disincentive to farmers, particularly if much of the expenditure is focused on cities or industries.
- 6 In rapidly urbanising countries, agriculture produces strategically important food for the growing number of urban residents in order to ensure food security at prices that are affordable.

(after Hodder, 2000: 80–82)

These six reasons explain the key interdependencies between rural and urban areas. While the discussion has so far concentrated on the links between the urban and the rural, one of the main reasons for the separate approaches is the attempt by many to identify the defining characteristics of what is 'urban' and what is 'rural'. However, Rigg (1998), in an analysis of South East Asia, cautions against 'pigeonholing' when it comes to such definitions. For example, he argues that to separate people into urban or rural categories is problematic. He outlines three main difficulties associated with such categorisation:

- 1 Registration records often do not detect changes in residence. For various reasons, it may be undesirable for recent in-migrants to be registered as urban dwellers. Rigg gives examples of under-reporting of urban residence, particularly in relation to the controversies this can pose during elections, when the definition of the area can have implications for the number of political representatives or the authority into which the representatives are elected (for further discussion of this, see Lynch, 2005).
- 2 Allocating people to discrete categories such as 'urban' or 'rural' assumes that these categories accurately reflect their realities. Rigg's own empirical research in Thailand, among others, has demonstrated the significance of fluid, fragmented and multilocation households to survival strategies. In Africa, there is also evidence of this, and that this results in households straddling and moving across the rural–urban interface (Smit, 2016) or at least maintaining social and cultural links with their rural origins (Owens, 2010). Thus, categorisation of them as one or the other makes no sense. In fact, boundaries between urban and rural can offer opportunities to trade across (Leybourne and Grant, 1999).
- 3 Rigg argues that many Asian urban residents do not consider the cities and towns they live in as 'home'. This is because they ultimately intend to return to their rural origins. The same is found in Africa, where many African urban residents speak of their villages. Rigg argues that this brings the issue of identities of the individuals into focus. 'Home' and 'place' are therefore ambiguous and shifting notions, involving multiple identities that can be embodied simultaneously.

A final concern that could be added to Rigg's three points above relates to the blurring of the actual geographical definition of the rural–urban divide. This is particularly the case where cities are physically expanding rapidly and extending their physical limits and their influence outwards into the rural areas. Adding to the difficulty of definition, we find that different sizes of settlement are defined as 'urban' by different countries. For example, Tati (2012) points out that in the DR Congo, an urban area is defined as a *municipalité* made up of a minimum population of 10,000, together with certain service delivery functions. Relatively small settlements are not counted as urban. However, the cities include extended metropolitan areas in their definitions of the city – or city-region. While such data allow for monitoring demographic changes in countries across time – for example, comparing rates of urban growth from one census to the next – this argument about the differences of definition suggests that comparisons between countries are problematic to say the least.

For example, Tsuruta (2003) reports that from its early establishment, Dar es Salaam in present-day Tanzania grew initially from rural in-migrants who maintained their links with their rural origins through cultural and ethnic-based associations focused around music, dance and other cultural activities. The UNHCR (2016) reports that Nigeria, the continent's largest country by population, experienced urban population growth of 6 per cent per annum between 1970 and 1996, and the proportion of the population living in urban areas grew from 7.4 per cent to 20 per cent of the country. The result is that the progression from rural to urban, or vice versa, is very unclear and varies from one country to another. Hardoy *et al.* (2001) suggest that it is best not to consider the proportion of urban and rural populations in terms of precise percentages because of the difficulty of enumerating, but rather in terms of a range of broad trends.

Researchers have also presented arguments for the separate definition of high-density rural areas that can occur under a particular set of characteristics. For example, McGee (1991) describes a kind of high-density rural area that he calls *desakota*, arguing that it is peculiar to Asia and suggesting it forms as a result of the metropolitan urban area extending its economy and influence into the surrounding rural areas, resulting in an intense mixture of agricultural and non-agricultural activities (see later discussion). Examples of *desakota* include areas around Jakarta, Manila and Bangkok. Mortimore (1998), however, carried out research on the environmental implications of what he called the 'close settled zone' around Kano in northern Nigeria, which displayed similar characteristics. This is a densely settled area that is extensive, but has maintained its rural nature. More recently, Cloete (2011) argues that the emergence of *desakota* regions in sub-Saharan Africa are in evidence. Examining population density in some parts of coastal West Africa, areas around Lake Victoria and along parts of the North African coast, there appears to be the emergence of *desakota* on the continent. However, Cloete argues that most urban and rural areas are extending their influence into the peri-urban zone and beyond, and there is evidence that this is an important and neglected feature of African cities. Cloete (2011) argues that a better understanding of and response to urbanisation can be developed in which the borders between urban and rural are broken down to provide new solutions to old urban problems.

Potter *et al.* (2008) argue that geographies of development are about relationships between people, environment and places in different locations and at a variety of scales. The nature of the interaction between city and countryside is at the heart of this focus. The relationships, by implication, involve geographies of groups and individuals. The location of a household, whether city or countryside, has a bearing on its livelihood assets and opportunities. The interaction between urban and rural is initiated in an attempt to take advantage of the differentials or complementarities between the two areas. The differential may be in the form of income and cost of living, supply and demand, or security and hazard. Potter *et al.* (2008: 319) go on to argue that the 'nature and relative significance of these relationships are changing constantly, both through time and space, and are themselves determined to a large extent by complex movements and flows of people, commodities, finance, ideas and information'.

Much of the basis of research that examines population in relation to the rural–urban interface relates to the migration of people across the rural–urban interface. In turn, much of this research focuses on rural-to-urban migration. To some extent, this is understandable, since net migration flows tend to be in this direction. However, there are questions about some of the research that has been carried out. For example, Feldman (1999) argued that previous approaches to the study of rural–urban migration were flawed. Based on his work in South Asia, but also resonating with the work of researchers working in Africa (Potts, 2008; Bennett *et al.*, 2015), he argued that problems can be summarised as:

- They focused on seasonal or temporary migration rather than on permanent migrants.
- They tended to focus on individuals rather than on households, thus focusing on migration as an outcome resulting from rural or urban change rather than as a process.
- There was a lack of research on the impacts of out-migration, such as the loss of agricultural labour capacity, the impact on rural infrastructural needs, and the impacts of the increased incomes on consumption or investment.

The result is an assumption that the remaining rural population is primarily dependent on remittances from urban migrants. This assumption has meant that non-farm employment and micro-industries in rural areas have received little research attention until relatively recently (e.g. see Bryceson, Chapter 27, this volume). Only recently has it been possible to examine the highly varied demographic profiles of migrants and their complex decision-making processes (e.g. see Bennett *et al.*, 2015a, 2015b on migration, gender and children; Potts, 1997, 2008 on migration and livelihoods). In particular, research that focuses on the social networks of migrants has provided powerful analyses of migration processes that are linked to more complex understandings of informal sector activities, slum and squatter communities, rural communities and the flows of people, capital and ideas through the social networks: ‘What kinds of continuity and discontinuity shape information and resource flows between (migration) sites? What kind of kin and familial networks facilitate and hinder mobility?’ (Feldman, 1999; see also Lynch, 2005; Bennett *et al.*, 2015a, 2015b).

The nature of the relation between town and countryside in the region could be where:

a large number of urban centers that will have strong economic ties based on exchanges of labor, goods and services with their surrounding rural areas. A network of local economic areas will emerge – unheard of thirty years ago – and just beginning in countries like Nigeria. These ‘market watersheds’ will cut across national borders in ways that will encourage economic growth.

(Club du Sahel, 1994: 54)

Potts (2008) argues that because the implications of migration can be negative as well as positive, the outcome depends on the social relations between the migrants and those affected. This may explain why many households practise livelihood strategies that straddle the urban and rural locations and income opportunities. It is important therefore that governments are sensitive to the informal institutions that structure and facilitate such migration and livelihood processes. It is these institutions that are the key to how migrants’ decisions can support livelihoods. This may well be a part explanation for the incredible growth of cellular telephones in sub-Saharan Africa. The importance of social networks provides a demand for technology to ensure those networks are connected (Poole and Lynch, 2003).

Conclusion

This chapter has set out to identify some of the key trends in rural–urban linkages and their significance for thinking and development policy or strategy interventions. This chapter has demonstrated that there is evidence in the literature of urban–rural relationships taking place on a number of levels. Whether it is credit provision or food supply, pollution or water supply, the urban–rural relationship has an impact on both the urban and the rural areas. Until the last 20 years, research has not given significant coverage to rural–urban relationships in Africa, with the exception of research on migration. Recent developments among INGOs strategies suggest a growing interest in the potential of promoting rural–urban interaction. There is now a need to better understand the relations between the cities and the countryside in order that those that use the interstices between the city and the countryside are better able to use such spaces to make a livelihood, produce or trade. Rural–urban relations can be exploitative, but they also provide potential for mutually beneficial links.

As Ellis and Harris (2004: iii) argue, ‘poverty reduction is perhaps not so much to do with supporting spatially and temporally static and stagnating sub-sectors of national economies. Rather it is about running with growth where and when it occurs’. This suggests that a focus on the linkages between urban and rural areas may be as important as the focus on the areas themselves.

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