

*Review*

# The evolving rural and urban interdependence: Opportunities and challenges for community economic development

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Regional science researchers and scholars continue to distinguish between “urban or metro” and “rural or nonmetro” counties and erroneously portray metro counties to be synonymous to urbanized areas and nonmetro as rural. But the U.S. Census Bureau in 2005 indicated that 51% of nonmetro counties are actually urban places and about 41% of all metro counties in the U.S. can also be classified as rural (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). A possible conclusion from the above is that there is an emerging interdependence between metro and nonmetro counties and hence between urban and rural areas which can generate both opportunities and challenges for economic development policymaking. Some of the challenges include differentiating urban from rural areas and how such distinctions could militate against public policy formulation to stir up development in the two areas. The review of the literature in this paper shows that the interdependence between rural and urban areas is real and that it is important for regional development practitioners and policy makers to engage in region-based development planning. The paper concluded that the interdependence between adjacent rural and urban or metro and non-metro counties could be used to leverage growth, and engage in successful cooperation to engender regional and global economic power for American communities.

**Key words:** Rural, urban, interdependence, regional economic development.

## INTRODUCTION

Researchers and regional science scholars continue to distinguish between “urban or metro” and “rural or nonmetro” counties, and erroneously portray metro counties especially in the United States to be synonymous to urbanized areas and nonmetro as rural. Meanwhile, the U.S. Census Bureau in 2005 projected that 51% of nonmetro counties are actually urban places and about 41% of all metro counties in the U.S. can also be classified as rural (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). What this means is that there is an emerging interdependence between metro and nonmetro counties and hence between urban and rural areas which can generate both opportunities and challenges for economic development policymakers. There is also a misunderstanding of rural conditions especially, and the attendant challenges of the misdirection of state and regional development programs and funds that can hurt not only rural regions but their adjacent urban areas (Isserman, 2005).

Additionally, the existing definitions that equate urban and rural areas to metro and nonmetro areas respectively deserve some consideration. This is because of the

implications that a failure to properly differentiate the two regions can have for planning to address their respective but unique challenges. Yet getting the distinction right is in the national interest since to work with the wrong definitions as had been the case for the most part means incorrect research conclusions were arrived about the people, places, and businesses our governmental programs are meant to serve (Irwin et al, 2010).

In the 1950s, communities (urban and rural) were seen to be detached from their neighbours. The economies of rural and urban communities were separate and distinct. However, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, new technologies and transportation innovations have changed these circumstances. Communities now are linked in a web of interrelated networks amidst a growing nonmetro-to-metro commuting evidenced by increasing urban spillovers that blur the distinction between rural and urban areas. These spillovers, among other things, are indicative of a need for a regional approach as opposed to existing segregated approaches to economic development and policy making in rural as well as urban counties and

communities.

Too often, government policy had tended to focus on making rural places healthy with policies that aim at resource development. But the emerging interdependence between rural and urban areas and their associated implications such as issues with defining what constitute urban versus rural areas tends to militate against any public policy instituted to develop one of the two areas. It is important that the public is educated about the presence and significance of the inter-dependence between rural and urban places. The result of the interdependence include the fact that rural populations within commuting distances depend on urban areas for employment, for private and public services, and for urban amenities, goods and services. The urban centers also depend on the rural labor force for some of their workforce, the rural population forms part of the market for the private and public goods and services provided in the city, as well as the urban amenities. These interdependences create challenges and opportunities that should be understood by policy makers and development planners in infrastructure planning decisions-making. Additionally, planning for urban development could gain from acknowledging the consequences of rural labor market that is integrated with urban economy and the underlying forces driving this interdependence.

This paper therefore reviews literature on the causes of the interdependence as well as the challenges associated with defining what constitute rural versus urban areas to make a case for region-based planning approaches in regional economic development and policy making. The case is made that by taking advantage of the interdependence, regions (adjacent rural and urban or metro and non-metro counties) could leverage growth, and engage in successful cooperation to engender regional and global economic power for American communities.

## **THE STATE OF RURAL-URBAN DEVELOPMENT PLANNING**

Ongoing evolutions in the socio-economic and cultural outlook in rural and urban environments have brought with it a convergence in value systems and attitudes in both places. The socio-economic changes emerging in new urban spatial environments had taken the form of a thinning of inner and middle cities, a creeping urbanization of the countryside, urban corridors extensions, and formation of edge cities (Uhl and Rossmiller, 1964). On the part of rural areas, the evolutions have taken the form of destruction of natural resources, poor educational facilities and opportunities, limited market opportunities for rural producers, and dwindling economic opportunities (Hughes and Holland, 1994; Bradshaw, 2000; Ali et al., 2007). But researchers in recent years have stressed the

value of strengthening the productive ties and cross-cultural relations between rural and urban locations. Dabson (2007) for instance argue that there is the need to preserve rural natural resources, improve labor market connections, improve educational facilities and opportunities in rural areas, and ensure that rural economies keep pace with changing metropolitan and urban demands both locally, nationally and globally.

Additionally, the cross-cultural interactions taking place require the development of institutional arrangements that warrants a regional collaborative approach to development between urban and their adjacent communities (Uhl and Rossmiller, 1964). The reason is that, benefits of such interrelationships far outweigh any purported competition especially when considered from economies of scale principles in terms of integrated planning approach by urban and rural societies (Uhl and Rossmiller, 1964; Bradshaw, 2000). Associated with the changing rural-urban relationship are improvement in transportation and communications, higher educational attainment, and common social activities. Miller (2007) for instance reports that whereas 15.4% of nonmetro residents had at least a Bachelors degree in year 2000, the rate for metro residents was 26.6%.

Urban and rural areas have customarily been classified as opposing and competitive fields for the purposes of planning, development and investment (Dabson, 2007). Both national and local governance structures have either failed or been unwilling to seek approaches to take advantage of any interrelationships or linkages that might exist between rural and urban places. But according to Uhl and Rossmiller (1964), it is no longer prudent to perceive rural and urban places as competitors. There is a realization now about the existence of an economic, social, cultural and environmental interdependence between urban and rural areas and a need for balanced and mutually supportive approaches to planning and development that is beneficial to both areas (Uhl and Rossmiller, 1964; Hughes and Holland, 1994; Okpala, 2003; Dabson, 2007).

Stauber (2001) makes the case that desegregating investment in metropolitan areas into nonmetro areas among other thing, could have significant effects for both urban and nonmetro areas. Some of the impacts include the following: Helping to protect and restore the environment by paying rural people for their stewardship of natural resources; produce high quality de-commodified food and fiber to meet an increasing demand for safer and better products; serve as laboratories for social innovation and test tubes for innovative solutions to societal problems to build on the merits of small community size and strong social bonds (Bradshaw, 2000); to produce healthy, well-educated future citizens who will be assets to the country generally, and to maintain population distribution and prevent urban crowding by creating smaller population centers that will expand and take some of the development pressures on

congested metropolitan areas (Uhl and Rossmiller, 1964; Hughes and Holland, 1994; Dabson, 2007). The complementary relationship between rural and urban areas makes it necessary for public (also private or corporate) investment to reflect the dichotomous relationship because investment in one has a greater potential to generate secondary effects in the other (Hughes and Holland, 1994). For instance, investment in agricultural research may lower food production costs and result in increased output. But the secondary or indirect effect flowing from the above will be the fact that consumers especially in urban areas will then have to spend smaller share of their incomes on farm produce thereby increasing their demand for industrial goods and services (Uhl and Rossmiller, 1964).

The emerging interdependence between rural and urban areas according to Bradshaw (2000) shows that American communities are in the third of three important phases associated with an increasingly complex social system that is shaping strategies for community economic development. The first phase relates to technical assistance by experts to rural community organization in areas of farming and industry. The second phase is where communities engage in group organizing and use of technical information and strategies for development. The third phase highlights formation of networks among organizations and in the case of this paper (rural and urban), communities because of shared resources and the need to collaborate and work to create programs that meet community needs, and also build capacity to solve common problems (Bradshaw and Blakely, 1979; Bradshaw, 2000).

Meanwhile, collaboration cannot happen in a vacuum because some institutional arrangement are required to deal with the disturbed situation that had taken place and the effects of the interdependence that is now been recognized. Thus it is important to identify the challenges posed by rural areas to urban areas and vice versa as well as the existing development approaches in American communities.

## **NOTED CHALLENGES TO RURAL AND URBAN AREAS**

A major challenge faced by “rural” as well as “urban” or “metro” areas relates to problems with the definition of what constitute a rural versus urban as well as metro and nonmetro areas. Several definitional tracks are available but this paper highlights three institutional definitions. The three institutions are the U.S. Census Bureau, the White House Office of management and Budget (OMB) and the Economic Research Service (ERS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The Census Bureau defines an urban area as large central or core city surrounded by densely populated areas. There are two types of urban areas, urbanized areas and urban clusters. An “urbanized

areas” is an urban nucleus of 50,000 or more people with a core area with a population density of 1,000 persons per square mile and also adjoining territories with densities of at least 500 persons per square mile. According to the 2000 Census, 68% of the US population lived in 452 urbanized areas.

Urban clusters, the other type of urban area classification consists of areas with populations of more than 2,500 but less than 50,000. In the 2000 census, 11% of Americans lived in 3,158 urban centers. Meanwhile, the rest of the country that is not captured in the definition of urban areas and which consists of open country and settlements of fewer than 2,500 people is classified by the Census Bureau as rural. In the 2000 census, 59 million or 20% of the U.S. population lived in rural areas. Meanwhile, the OMB uses different designations, metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas to describe cities, towns, and their surrounding areas in America. According to the OMB, Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs) are the central or “core” with one or more urbanized areas or principal city of at least 50,000 population, and outlying counties that are economically tied to the core counties measured by distances between work and residences. The OMB definition includes outlying counties in the designation of MSAs where 25% of workers in the core counties have their residences in the outlying counties or where 25% of the employment in the county is provided by the central counties. Based on the OMB designations, there also exist micropolitan areas which contain a principal city of 10,000 to 49,999 populations with surrounding counties that are linked to it through commuting ties. The remainder of counties that have not been considered in either of the metro or micro areas is designated as noncore counties, and both the micropolitan areas and noncore areas constitute the nonmetro counties which according to Miller and Fluharty (2006) are often equated with rural. Isserman (2005) states that the designation of metropolitan areas according to the OMB combines information on settlement and commuting patterns just like the Census Bureau. In the most recent listing of Core-Based Statistical Areas for the US in 2005, the OMB reported that 232 million people live in metro counties, 29.5 million live in micropolitan counties, and 19 million in noncore counties.

The Economic Research Service (ERS) of the US Department of Agriculture also classify rural and urban areas differently from that of the Census Bureau or the OMB. The ERS measures the degree of rurality based on “rural-urban continuum” codes that distinguishes metro counties based on their population size and nonmetro counties by their degree of urbanization and adjacency to metro areas (Isserman, 2005). It is important to note that there are several other ways that regional science researchers have defined or classified rural and urban areas just to suit their research objectives. The implication of such approaches is that there is no one-

size-fits-all definition for what is rural or urban. From the foregoing, it becomes clear that official definitions of what constitute rural and urban by the Census Bureau, the OMB, and the ERS as well as several other agencies portray a different and a difficult picture of what is originally a complex picture. At best, each of the approaches is designed to suit the research interests or objective of the agency doing the classifications to the detriment of a more generalized definition that puts the needs of both areas in the picture. The very confusion surrounding the definition of what is rural and urban contributes in great measure to make it all the more necessary for collaborative efforts that utilize regional development approaches to engender economic growth and development for communities.

More so, the methodology and definitions available to demarcate and classify urban and rural (metro and nonmetro) areas according to Isserman (2005) is biased against rural areas. The argument is that existing Census Bureau definition for instance, carefully and precisely defines what constitute an urban area or metro county while designating whatever is left as rural and/or nonmetro. "...this separation of territory into town and country, urban or rural, metro or nonmetro, leads us to define rural simply as homogenous with respect to not being urban or not being metropolitan" (p.466). Furthermore, both metro and nonmetro counties contain both urban and rural areas and county level geography is found to not accurately reflect the distribution of urban and rural populations. To this end, Miller (2006) argues that the use of nonmetro classifications to define rural areas is not appropriate. As per the 2000 census and the Core-Based Statistical Areas (CBSAs) status from the December 2005 classifications, more than half (51%) of all rural residents (over 30 million people) live in metro counties, and that 41% of nonmetropolitan populations (over 20 million residents) is urban (Isserman, 2005).

The fact that some nonmetropolitan areas are urban while quite a sizeable portion of metropolitan counties are rural makes it difficult to draft policies and programs that target one or the other. Miller and Fluharty (2006) have argued that some of the urban targeting efforts in America for instance have tended to discriminate against some of the areas that are classified as "urban" (smaller cities and towns) as well as rural populations within metropolitan counties. Similarly, rural programs which target only nonmetropolitan residents also tends to miss out on some of the urbanized areas in nonmetro regions. For instance in the 2003 financial year, Miller (2007) says federal funding for rural or nonmetro areas was nearly \$550 less per capita than was received in metro areas, and the overall per capita federal funding for community resources represented a smaller share of nonmetro funding (9%) than in metro areas (15%). Meanwhile, metropolitan areas are a continuum of very rural to very urban places and vice versa for nonmetropolitan areas (Isserman, 2005; Kubisch, 2007). These dynamics pose

grave challenges for economic development program planning and implementation, and calls for new strategies to be in place that brings the interests and needs of both urbanized areas as well as rural places into perspective for a regional-focused development. The argument had been made that, strategies to promote the economic prosperity of rural and for that matter, urban or metropolitan areas will be better utilized if they are not based on zero-sum reallocation of resources from urban to rural areas (Isserman, 2005). Additionally, such strategies will also be useful where they reinforce and strengthen linkages between urban and rural places and populations that appropriate rewards to both rural and urban locations (Isserman, 2005; Kubisch, 2007).

In contributing to the debate on the need to bridge the rural-urban divide in terms of development planning and resource allocation, Karl (2001) argues that rural policy in America is unfocused, outdated, and ineffective. He stated that the policy as it exists is more of a "one-size fits all," sector-specific, urban-based, top-down, and uninformed about the issues and constraints that confront rural communities in America. Stauber makes the case that such policies have been detrimental to the middle class especially in rural areas by reducing the economic opportunities available to them, increased the concentration of poverty in rural areas and its racial connotations, and led to destruction of the quality of natural resources which formed the core of what he calls "ruralness."

Rural areas are also known to be lagging behind in the race for jobs and income as a result of a critical mass and heavy reliance on commodity engines in the face of scant transformative innovation (Bradshaw, 2000). The rural-urban imbalance had also been associated with increasing urban poverty and especially, its implications for gender relations. The numbers of female-headed households in cities for instance have been rising in recent years, with significant proportions of these households living below locally defined poverty lines (Okpala, 2003). The foregoing is affirmed by the high poverty rates in nonmetro or rural areas compared to their urban or metro counterparts. For instance, in 2005, the poverty rate for metro areas in the US was 12.2% compared to 14.5% for nonmetro areas.

Contributing to the debate on the competitiveness of rural regions, Porter et al. (2004) posited that the failure of rural policies is a major reason why rural economies trail urban and metro areas, and the effects of such a situation had been that rural areas are unable to access adequate public financial resources especially during times of budget deficits and cuts in spending. Similarly, the weak performances in rural economies slow down growth in national output and wealth in the face of globalization. Porter et al. (2004) also argues that weak rural performance necessitates resource conversion and reallocation from productive economic activities. To put the argument in perspective and move on to consider

reasons for dealing with the challenges raised here, the question posed by Robert (2004) “why should we care about rural America?” becomes exceedingly important.

## **JUSTIFICATION FOR NEW REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLANNING APPROACHES**

The discussions offered so far suggest that twenty-first century communities are linked in a web of inter-relationships and networks and require economic development approaches that focus on the strengths of that interdependence among communities. The contention among proponents of regionally-focused collaborative approaches to rural-urban planning and development is that the two areas share many points of interdependence (Hughes and Holland, 1994; Bradshaw 2000; Ali et al., 2007). Dabson (2007) for instance states that, rural areas provide critical consumption goods for metropolitan consumers such as food, energy, low-cost land and labor, and unique experiences; metro areas also serve as the end market for rural production, provide specialized services, offer different job opportunities, and generate resources for public and private investment in rural communities (Stauber, 2001; Kubisch, 2007).

Furthermore, the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy in a May 2004 report on philanthropic giving stated that out of the \$30 billion distributed annually by foundations in the U.S., only \$100.5 million was allocated to rural development efforts. Also, of the over 65,000 active grantmaking foundations in the nation, only 184 engaged in rural development grantmaking (NCRP, 2004)<sup>1</sup>. These dynamics further exacerbates the already pervasive conditions of rural communities and their CDFs and organizations that are brought into competition with their more resources urban and metro counterparts in an environment that play to the advantage of the latter group (Miller, 2007; Tandoh-Offin, 2009).

Meanwhile, the problem of lack of community development foundations in rural communities in the U.S. for example may seem at first to be a problem that affects only rural community (Tandoh-Offin, 2009). But when their impacts for urban residents as well are put in perspective, it becomes clearer that it is a statewide problem that must be dealt with by both urban and rural residents alike (Newstead and Wu, 2009). Urban residents will benefit from the development of rural areas as it could prevent the influx of populations from rural areas into the urban areas to put pressure on the resources and amenities available in the cities (Richardson and London, 2007). What is more, it is difficult now to delineate rural territories from urban or metro areas. The fact is that, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, as of December 2005, over half of all rural people reside in metro counties. And, over 40 million

metropolitan residents reside outside of large urbanized areas. As a result, it is pointless for urban or metro communities to seem to be in competition with rural communities for foundation or community development finance for instance, since in the end, what may be considered a rural problem today could as well become an urban challenge in the near future. Meanwhile, state governments and regional level development agencies and practitioners all have a role to play in embarking on comprehensive development planning approaches where the interests of rural communities within their jurisdictions are given due consideration. Areas of focus in this regard could include fostering urban-rural interaction around policy decision points where there seem to be a convergence in the interests of the two constituencies. Additionally, regional development agents can take it upon themselves to engage in the development of rural community institutional capacity to develop the tools to be able to source outside grants, develop redevelopment programs and understand the workings of regional collaboration.

In contributing to how the rural-urban interdependence could be harnessed, Kubisch (2007) utilized a framework titled “people-place-prosperity.” She posits that the challenges of rural and urban areas as a result of their interdependence can be addressed through a rural-urban alliance that focuses on improved and responsive public education that builds the capacities of individuals in both regions. The requirements for the “place” in Kubisch’s framework focuses on countryside stewardship where urban areas are required to compensate rural areas for taking care and preserving the natural environment. She posits further that regional responses to globalization will reap economic prosperity for both rural and urban areas because as Miller (2007) puts it, globalization rewards regions with critical mass. And in the case of the framework proposed by Kubisch (2007), public education will enable communities to build the human capacity and critical masses to deal with environmental and natural resource challenges and eventually globalization.

It is important to stress that adequate infrastructure such as transportation, communication, energy, and basic human and social services that are necessary for social capital development are exceptionally vital for a strong rural-urban inter-connectivity and dependence. Okpala (2003) has argued that the availability of adequate infrastructure such as transportation facilities has the power to generate ease of mobility and access to employment and also bring about enhancements in the incomes of individuals and households. Dabson (2007) summarizes the salient points from Tacoli’s (1998) “flow” typology and Kubisch’s (2007) “people-place-prosperity” framework into an 11-point regional development strategy to deal with the challenges arising from rural-urban interdependence. He contends that of the 11 interactions, seven show the contributions from rural America to metropolitan America with the remaining four being ways urban areas sustain the national economy and for that

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<sup>1</sup> National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (2004) “Beyond City Limits: The Philanthropic Needs of Rural America.”

matter, rural areas as well. The contributions from rural areas, according to Dabson (2007) include: Farming and farming-related industries where rural areas engage in food and crop production to feed urban America, and so it will be necessary for farmers and customers to understand each others needs such as regular supply of inputs and resources for production.

The next strategy is energy supply which had become a major rural productive activity because of innovative energy sources such as ethanol and biodiesel and wind power. But rural areas need not be exploited unnecessarily for the comfort of urban economies. Additionally, rural areas, especially those within commuting distances of urban areas have become origins of human resources especially well-educated individuals to the urban labor market due to the lack of employment opportunities at these areas. Region-focused planning has the potential to address some of these challenges through provision of educational facilities, and opportunities in rural areas within the catchment of major economic hubs, or core cities. Also, as far as stewardship of the natural environment is concerned, Dabson (2007) reiterates points expressed by Kubisch (2007) that urban areas are required to compensate rural areas for taking care and preserving the natural environment. These may include congestion relief and waste management and those of areas with aesthetic value that provide good vista to urban residents who enjoy nature and its resources.

Meanwhile, the five areas where metropolitan regions are expected to play lead role as their responsibility under the interdependent relations according to Dabson (2007) include provision of reliable and functioning market for the products from rural enterprises. Furthermore, jobs both in the metropolis and also in the adjoining areas that are economically tied to central cities. Also, the provision of specialized services such as banking, finance and insurance, high-end retail, specialized medical services, entertainment and cultural activities and legal services, as well as economic and social activities that generate economies of scale for both areas is suggested. Finally, resource capacity development is encouraged. Here the focus is on wealth-generating capacities through higher education and employment opportunities, opportunities for innovative and entrepreneurial development from a regional development standpoint.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout this paper, the case that there is an emerging interdependence between metro and nonmetro counties and hence between urban and rural areas as well as the opportunities and challenges it has for economic development planning had been espoused. The emerging interdependence between rural and urban areas and their associated implications such as issues with defining

what constitute and urban versus rural area tends to militate against any public policy intended to develop one of the two areas.

The case is made that by taking advantage of the interdependence; regions (adjacent rural and urban or metro and non-metro counties) could leverage growth, and engage in successful cooperation to engender regional and global economic power for American communities. Communities will be able to reap maximum benefits from the emerging or existing interdependence through a viable public education campaign that helps to erode any form of ignorance that weaken communities and regions.

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