



PASCAL International Observatory

Briefing Paper 9

Learning Initiatives to Connect the Urban and Rural

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Executive Summary

Strengthening rural-urban inter-dependence is fundamental to reducing regional disparities, enhancing environmental quality, and maintaining national integrity and social cohesion.

Cities and Universities have a vital role to play in developing and promoting learning initiatives.

The importance of rural-urban interdependence

As cities have grown bigger – and more numerous – their relationships with rural areas have changed, as have the needs of rural areas. People in rural areas can only take advantage of the assets of where they live if they have better access to education and to local employment. The development of innovative solutions highlights the vital role of universities and community leaders working together in this process if progress is to be made.

Recent trends and analysis

Urbanisation has been a powerful force for knowledge and growth since well before the industrial revolution. As cities have grown bigger, their relationships with rural areas have changed – as have the needs of rural areas. Historically, people in rural areas did not have the same educational opportunities as people in cities. But the modern economy transforms rural and urban areas alike, and has been doing so for a long time: mining in Renaissance Europe led to a revival of ancient Roman science and engineering; the industrial revolution took off in rural areas where natural resources were abundant.

Cities still enjoy advantages in the form of specialization and concentration, but face problems which impede the formation of stable, supportive communities which old and young alike need. Today transport and communication have evened out many of the factors which for so long have led to

rapid urban growth. People in rural areas however can only take advantage of these opportunities if they also have access to education and – (and this is critical) – opportunities to improve the conditions for living and working in the places where they live.

Research has shown what happens when urbanization reaches an OECD average of 75%:

- Some rural regions continue to grow in population and employment;
- Medium-size cities, which are often closer to rural areas, have the most potential for growth;
- Rural areas that stagnate or decline can become very insecure and unstable, threatening national integrity.

These trends can occur in richer and poorer nations. The Great Plains in the United States suffered more than two decades of decline while much of the rest of the country was enjoying growth after 1990; as the commercial base of many small towns collapsed, people had to travel further to get basic services.

This vicious spiral can be difficult to reverse. There are historic tensions which explain why cities tend to neglect rural areas. Universities which are located outside major metropolitan centres have an obligation to help serve the people in their region. But the traditional campus-based model of teaching and research can be remote, literally and figuratively, from people in outlying communities.

There may be a moral argument why rural-urban interdependence must be strengthened: no country should tolerate disadvantage, and especially with handicaps that trap people generation after generation in places with little hope. There is also an economic rationale based on the benefits of expanding markets when, with better education and opportunities, rural areas prosper: this is the way to create a virtuous cycle. If young people in rural areas leave, the proportion of elderly who remain rises; increasing dependency ratios and higher costs make it difficult for the public sector to offer quality services. It is therefore in everyone's interest to increase opportunities in rural regions. But getting a political consensus can be difficult. Rural areas – and the intermediate regions between remote rural areas and sprawling cities – are critical in the political process: in countries as different as Thailand and Korea, or Greece and France, people in rural areas that sense that power and wealth are concentrated in cities have taken to protest. The opposition to the Democratic Party in the US is strong in rural West Virginia and Kentucky; the opposition to the Republicans is strong in highly urbanized California and New York.

Policy and practice responses

There is a lot going on in rural regions and in cities, but often the actors do not talk to each other, nor do they form partnerships. Putting the two together – rural and urban - adds up to sustainable development. The global environment challenge makes it imperative to manage space better. We can only get results if both rural and urban regions change – but they need to change in different ways. Water, food supply, disaster risk management, housing – these call for the right mix of local leadership and knowledge, and professional expertise. The skills, imagination and investment to do this could shape an agenda for the coming generation.

The network idea is fundamental: experts and practitioners learning from one another. We often say that global problems have local solutions; the reverse is also true, that local problems call for greater international exchange.

Needed are partnerships between local authorities and universities. Mexico has a requirement that every university graduate must perform about 4 months of voluntary service; many work in rural communities. The network of campus of Tecnológico de Monterrey has a unique on-line programme to help adults complete secondary education. Examples of similar innovations that are not so well-known internationally could be multiplied.

Recommended actions

Cities and their local and regional educational institutions should form partnerships to:

- Improve adult education at all ages.
- Apply knowledge to local problems.
- Help transfer inspiring and successful innovations from one context to another.
- Build and maintain institutions that “open doors” such as libraries and that “open gates” such as markets. This is especially important in areas where public governance is weak, corrupt and poorly staffed.
- Enhance the assets of places, and give value to local cultural traditions.
- Document, evaluate and communicate what works (and what doesn’t).

Key Sources and related articles:

OECD (2016) *OECD Regional Outlook 2016: Productive Regions for Inclusive Societies*. Paris: OECD

OECD (2016) *Regions at a Glance 2016* (especially Chapter One, “Well-Being in Regions”). Paris: OECD

The PASCAL International Observatory can help promote and validate innovative solutions. Experts in our Learning Cities Network can:

- *Address university leaders at the Vice-Chancellor level, city leaders including mayors, the administrators who do things, and policy-makers at regional and national level.*
- *Reach the development and philanthropic sectors by producing a stand-alone report and an active web site.*
- *Inform and engage local business leaders who can help define educational and skill needs and promote entrepreneurship especially among young people.*
- *Identify research priorities for foundations and national research councils.*

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