

Promoting the Positive Rural-Urban Linkages Approach to Sustainable Development and Employment Creation: The Role of UN-HABITAT¹

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is now widely recognized that there exists an economic, social and environmental interdependence between urban and rural areas and a need for balanced and mutually supportive approach to development of the two areas. The discrete consideration of rural development as completely distinct from urban development is no longer valid. A new perspective, referred to as the *rural-urban linkage development approach*, is increasingly becoming the accepted approach. Rural-urban linkage generally refers to the growing flow of public and private capital, people (migration and commuting) and goods (trade) between urban and rural areas. It is important to add to these the flow of ideas, the flow of information and the flow of diffusion of innovation.

Adequate infrastructure such as transportation, communication, energy and basic services is the backbone of the urban-rural development linkage approach. There is a positive relationship between adequacy of transportation infrastructure, ease of mobility and access to employment and enhancement of income. Adequate investments in infrastructure, particularly transportation infrastructure, also improve rural productivity and allow access to markets, jobs and public service by both men and women.²

It is important therefore that governments at the national or central level, at local (municipal) level of large cities, small and medium-sized towns and rural areas, recognize the potentials of rural-urban development linkages, the impact of their development actions on urban and rural areas and the positive role they can play in poverty alleviation. There is a need to gain better understanding of the relationships between urban and rural areas and the variety in the nature of these linkages.

¹ This paper was presented at the International Federation of Surveyors (FIG) 2nd Regional Conference on *Urban-Rural Interrelationship for Sustainable Development*, December 2-5, 2003, Marrakech, Morocco.

²The relationships or inter-linkages between urban and rural areas are not all positive or beneficial to both ends of the spectrum. Cities and their metropolitan extensions absorb productive agricultural land, exploit water resources, pollute the rural environment and act as sinks for urban waste. On the other hand, cities rarely expand and build up efficiently. There often remains extensive rural areas within cities and their metropolitan boundaries, giving rise to the phenomenon of urban villages with urban farming occupation and prevalence.

It is recognized that a number of projects undertaken in the recent past in various countries and regions adopt the urban-rural linkage development as a strategy for achieving faster development in relatively under-developed areas in developing countries. This trend needs to be enhanced and promoted in a wider range of countries among national, regional (metropolitan) and local development actors.

Closely linked to the rural urban imbalance is the increasing urban poverty, and of particular concern is the commensurate gender implications, with men and women experiencing the urban environment differently. The absolute number of female-headed households in cities has risen in recent years, with a significant proportion of these households living below the locally defined poverty line. The pertinent issues that need to be addressed in this regard are to raise the earning capacity of income and assets accumulation, including land, by these households through providing opportunities and empowering women entrepreneurs. Improving mobility between urban and rural areas would enhance the income generating and earning capacity of rural and urban women.

2. THE ROLE OF UN-HABITAT IN PROMOTING POSITIVE RURAL-URBAN LINKAGES

The International Development Agenda is increasingly recognizing the potency of the rural-urban linkage development approach to sustainable development and employment creation in developing countries. In its efforts to promote the eradication of poverty and sustainable development, UN-HABITAT considers this approach as having potentials both for promoting positive rural-urban development benefits and for generating substantial employment and therefore contributing to poverty eradication. The Habitat Agenda (paragraphs 10, 99, 141 and 147) clearly makes the case for economic, social and environmental interdependence and for the need for balanced and mutually supportive development between rural and urban areas. The Agenda reasons that by providing adequate infrastructure such as transport, communication, energy and other basic services mobility problems between rural and urban areas can be eased and access to markets, employment and other income earning opportunities can be enhanced.

Resolution 17/10 of the 17th Session of the Governing Council of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT) recommended that “*urban-rural interdependence be taken into consideration in the execution of the work programme of the UN-HABITAT, given the strong synergy between urban and rural areas.*” Pursuant to this, UN-HABITAT convoked a colloquium on *Urban-Rural Synergies* in May 1999 in Nairobi, Kenya to explore and initiate development of a programme on the urban-rural inter-linkage development approach.

Related to the same issue, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) Committee on Socio-economic Measures to Alleviate Poverty in Rural and Urban Areas at its meeting in December 2001 recommended that “*governments pay more attention to the development of small and medium-sized towns and build the capacity for poverty*

alleviation of local governments in those towns in order to reduce the pressure on mega-cities and primate cities, and it urges ESCAP to provide technical assistance in this area.”

Acknowledging the importance of rural-urban complementarities for poverty alleviation and sustainable rural development and urbanization, Resolution 19/10 of the 19th Session of the Governing Council of UN-HABITAT “*Encourages Governments to institutionalize and integrate rural-urban linkages into their respective national and sub-national development planning processes...*” The resolution also requests UN-HABITAT to “*Raise awareness regarding the direct relationship between urban-rural development linkages...*” and *To disseminate good practices and policies on mutually beneficial urban-rural development relationships which could be replicated in other countries, and to help develop the capacity of central Governments and local authorities in that area.”*

In response to these resolutions and towards promoting awareness, disseminating good practices and building capacity among national and local development actors UN-HABITAT organized a Ministerial Round Table on ***Rural-Urban Interface and Slums*** at the 2003 ECOSOC High Level Segment in Geneva in July 2003 to raise awareness and share experiences on enhancing positive rural-urban linkages approach to development. The theme of this year’s ECOSOC High Level Segment was *Promoting an integrated approach to rural development in developing countries for poverty eradication and sustainable development*. The Round Table explored and exchanged experiences on the issue and made suggestions towards achieving a balanced urban-rural development in developing countries.

Consequent on the discussions and recommendations of the Ministerial Round Table, the overall Declaration of the ECOSOC High Level Segment undertook to *promote rural-urban linkages by developing and strengthening a system of intermediate-size secondary and tertiary settlements (towns) to stimulate rural development as well as to minimize the negative impacts of rural-urban migration. At the same time, we will encourage programmes and policies designed to strengthen rural service center and small town systems, including strengthening institutions and mechanisms for local or regional planning.*

Further towards promotion of this approach to development, UN-HABITAT undertook an assessment of the urban-rural development impacts of *the Spatial Development Initiative (SDI)*, which is currently being implemented in Southern African states, with a view to promoting replication of the strategy in other regions of the developing world. The outcome of this assessment was presented and discussed at the *International Conference on Sustainable Urbanisation Strategies* in November 2003 in Weihai, China. The Conference provided another platform for disseminating and building awareness of this approach to development.

UN-HABITAT is further proposing to organize an inter-regional conference *on Strategies for Enhancing Rural-urban Linkages Approach to Development and Promotion of Local Economic Development* to be held in October 2004 in Durban, South Africa. The immediate objective of the conference is to create and promote awareness among national economic and social development policy makers, their policy advisers and urban-rural development

management actors, of the necessity of enhancing the balanced development of both rural and urban areas, with a view to promoting local economic development and generating employment. It envisages to do this by pooling, collating, synthesizing and sharing these experiences and lessons with a view to stimulating mutual learning, capacity-building and utilization.

3. CONCLUSION

Considering economic, demographic and environmental complementarities that exist between rural and urban areas there is a need to promote rural-urban linkages development approach, which posits urban and rural areas as the two ends of the human settlements continuum. Thus, current discussion on the rural dimension of sustainable urban development should emphasize policies that are supportive of urbanization while addressing the challenge of increasing investment in physical, economic and social infrastructures that are necessary for improving rural productivity and access to markets.

As rapid urbanization of developing countries is inevitable, particularly amidst the phenomenon of globalization, the capacity of cities and towns should be strengthened to enable them productively absorb excess rural population and to better manage urban development. This includes addressing problems of high urban unemployment rates, pressure on urban infrastructure and services and in some countries, labour shortages in rural areas. While accepting the inevitability of urbanization, people remaining in rural areas should be guaranteed decent standards and conditions of living.

Rural development should not be based on policies that deter rural-to-urban migration but rather on the need to improve economic and social conditions of rural population and the need for the rural areas to effectively contribute to the national economic growth through increased agricultural and non-agricultural productivity. An improved rural infrastructure is a necessary condition for improving productivity in rural areas as well as for enhancing access of agricultural produce to both urban areas and the export market. This brings to the fore the urgent need for developing countries to design and implement realistic urban-rural and spatial infrastructure policies within the context of a set of coherent national human settlements policies. In many developing countries, addressing rural-urban infrastructure gaps requires therefore more, rather than less, government action.

The old orthodoxy of a discrete and dichotomous approach to urban development as distinct from rural development no longer accords with reality, considering the complementary functions and flows of people, capital, goods and services, employment, information and technology between the two areas. Rural and urban areas are economically, socially and environmentally interdependent.

UN-HABITAT is committed to and has invested efforts and resources in promoting a more holistic and balanced urban-rural development inter-relationships and raising awareness of the process and helping in developing the capacity of central governments and local authorities in this process.

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