

The crucial role of rural-urban linkages

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A basic definition of rural-urban linkages is that they consist of flows (of goods, people, information, finance, waste, information, social relations) across space, linking rural and urban areas. Perhaps a less descriptive definition is of the functional links between sectors (agriculture, industry and services). The latter is central to structural change taking place in both rural and urban areas.

Urbanisation has significant impacts on rural areas, and demand for food is perhaps the most important, together for demand for other natural resources (water, fuelwood, etc.). In many regions of the world we are witnessing an increase in production, especially of perishable and high-value products such as fruit, vegetables and dairy, responding to urban demand. This is especially the case in rural areas that are well connected to urban markets by transport links, communications and electricity, and by networks of local traders.

From a policy perspective, infrastructure is without doubt a priority for positive rural-urban linkages. However, this should not be limited to connecting rural areas to large urban centres; urbanisation is not merely the growth of cities, but is also the often more important (in demographic and economic terms) growth of intermediate and small urban centres. These can play a central role in the development of their rural regions, which is strengthened by adequate infrastructure.

What we are also seeing almost everywhere is a considerable increase in income diversification: rural incomes are less and less based only on agriculture. This is positive in that it allows smallholder families to invest in agricultural production, and be less dependent on the insecurity inherent in farming. In many cases income diversification involves migration to urban centres; but in the most positive cases, income diversification goes hand in hand with the diversification of the local economic base, where processing of agricultural produce retains added value and provides non-farm jobs.

From a policy perspective, supporting the diversification of rural economies and strengthening the role of small towns/large villages where these activities take place is an important way to strengthen positive rural-urban linkages.

The two previous points refer to structural change taking place in rural areas. While this is generally positive, it is important to keep in mind that it also often entails growing inequalities and social polarisation. Landless households, households with limited labour, women and young people can be net losers in such transformations.

From a policy perspective, territorial development and decentralisation are central. But to be successful, there is a need for a better fit between national and sectoral policies and local development strategies that reflect the context-specific opportunities and challenges. This, in turn, requires local institutions and governments that can also address issues of inequality. To do so, they need to have access to disaggregated data, have financial autonomy and achieve legitimacy through accountability to their citizens.

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References:

This communication builds on work on rural-urban linkages conducted in the past 20 years with partners in Africa, Asia and Latin America, as well as on current research on food consumption, urbanisation and rural transformations at IIED.

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