

# Rethinking socio-territorial relations: an urban-rural approach to sustainable development

## Repensar las relaciones socioterritoriales: un enfoque urbano-rural para el desarrollo sostenible

## Repensando as relações sócio-territoriais: uma abordagem urbano-rural para o desenvolvimento sustentável

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## ABSTRACT

Population growth and continued urbanization put pressure on natural resources, causing significant changes at the territorial level and raising the need for adequate urban and regional planning by local and national governments. To this end, humanity needs to broaden the reflection on the progress of developing nations in order to understand the spatial relationships of societies and how they can increase their knowledge of social, environmental and economic interdependence. In this sense, the purpose of this essay is to present a reflection on the sustainable development of countries through the strengthening of urban-rural interconnections. The approach implies the transition towards an inclusive paradigm that emerges from the understanding of the urban and the rural and their interdependent relationship to guarantee a greater degree of socioeconomic and environmental well-being in the medium and long term.

**Keywords:** sustainable development; territorial development; rural population; urban population; socio-territorial relations.

## RESUMEN

El crecimiento demográfico y la continua urbanización ejercen presión sobre los recursos naturales, lo que causa cambios significativos a escala territorial y eleva la necesidad de hacer una adecuada planificación urbana y regional por parte de los gobiernos locales y nacionales. Para ello, la humanidad requiere ampliar la reflexión sobre el progreso de las naciones en desarrollo a fin de comprender las relaciones espaciales de las sociedades y cómo estas pueden aumentar sus conocimientos sobre la interdependencia social, ambiental y económica. En ese sentido, este ensayo tiene el propósito de exponer una reflexión sobre el desarrollo sostenible de los países a través del fortalecimiento de las interconexiones urbano-rurales. El planteamiento implica la transición hacia un paradigma inclusivo que emerge de la comprensión de lo urbano y lo rural y su relación interdependiente para garantizar un mayor grado de bienestar socioeconómico y ambiental a mediano y largo plazo.

**Palabras clave:** desarrollo sostenible; desarrollo territorial; población rural; población urbana; relaciones socioterritoriales.

## RESUMO

O crescimento demográfico e a urbanização contínua pressionam os recursos naturais, causando mudanças significativas na escala territorial e aumentando a necessidade de um planejamento urbano e regional adequado por parte dos governos locais e nacionais. Para isso, a humanidade precisa ampliar a pensamento sobre o progresso das nações em desenvolvimento para entender as relações espaciais das sociedades e como elas podem aumentar sua compreensão da interdependência social, ambiental e econômica. Nesse sentido, este ensaio tem como objetivo apresentar uma reflexão sobre o desenvolvimento sustentável dos países por meio do fortalecimento das interconexões urbano-rurais. A abordagem implica a transição para um paradigma inclusivo que emerge da compreensão do urbano e do rural e de sua relação de interdependência para garantir um maior grau de bem-estar socioeconômico e ambiental a médio e longo prazo.

**Palavras-chave:** desenvolvimento sustentável; desenvolvimento territorial; população rural; população urbana; relações socioterritoriais.

## Introduction

Modern urban and regional planning seeks to address the social and economic needs triggered by the Industrial Revolution and, today, by the environmental dimension and digitalization (Hall et al., 2019). Sharifi et al. (2023) state that the main thematic areas for planning specialists are related to inequality and socioeconomics, economic growth and innovation, urban ecology and land use planning, and urban policy, governance, and sustainability.

Current conditions are characterized by increasing urbanization, which imposes planning challenges to meet the needs for infrastructure, mobility, transportation, food security, raw materials, access to basic services, etc. In 2007, the world population was split evenly between rural and urban inhabitants. One year later, for the first time, the urban population slightly surpassed the rural population in proportional terms. In 2021, the rural population accounted for 43.52% of the total population (World Bank, 2022), highlighting the trend towards urbanization, especially in developing and less advanced countries.

Despite urban growth, poverty retains a rural face (Kay, 2009). Faced with the challenge of eradicating poverty, sustainable development seeks a social, environmental, and economic balance that promotes the well-being of both rural and urban populations and the environment. However, the accelerated commercial dynamics of this century have called into question the equitable territorial relationships of populations and their activities, and have placed rural inhabitants at a disadvantage in terms of access and coverage of basic services such as health, education, formal employment, housing and sanitation, and Internet access.

Structural changes at the demographic level and in the urban-rural spatial transition can lead to conflicts; thus, a better understanding is required to ensure an optimal transition in land use (Zhu et al., 2020). The ongoing trend of urbanization brings with it artificial spatial configurations, such as transportation networks, paved areas, commercial and industrial zones, sanitary landfills and dumps, and civil constructions in building development. All these factors jeopardize the functional diversity of spaces, making them vulnerable to extreme weather events and pollution (Morgado et al., 2018).

According to Guzmán (2010), cities have been conceived as hubs that import external resources while simultaneously exporting both tangible and intangible waste; this constitutes an economic exchange. However, today there is an increasing need to understand urban-rural relations and their critical importance for sustainable development. This relational approach goes beyond the exploitative or geographical perspective of rural and urban areas and prioritizes focusing on social actors and transformations in the territories.

“ Urban-rural relations are manifested in socioeconomic and environmental interactions among human beings or inhabitants settled in a territory with particular characteristics that allow distinguishing livelihoods and the environment. ”

The “de-agrarianization” of the countryside and the emergence of economic pluriactivity in rural areas (i.e., agricultural and non-agricultural) have altered the relationship between the countryside and the city (Ávila, 2005). These economic transitions must be proactively and comprehensively planned from the urban-rural sphere with the aim of building agro-food and sustainable relationships from a spatial and land-use approach at the regional level (Lazzarinni, 2018). The urban-rural relations are manifested in socioeconomic and environmental interactions among human beings or inhabitants settled in a territory with particular characteristics that allow distinguishing livelihoods and the environment.

Hou et al. (2020) found that the quantity and quality of ecosystem services were being affected by the landscape pattern, associated with land cover and use. Sukhdev et al. (2015) categorize ecosystem services according to their function (climate regulation, habitat, provisioning, and cultural) and place ecosystems and their services as a central axis for the development of human societies and the conservation of biodiversity.

He and Zhang (2022) conclude that the asymmetric power relations generated since the Industrial Revolution (such as inequality in the division of labor) cause urban-rural disparities. In order to create more equitable societies, countries are called upon to change their conception of development, taking into account development hubs and the quality of urban-rural relations. In this regard, this essay aims to present a reflection on the sustainable development of countries through a vision for strengthening urban-rural relations.

## Development

In 1987, the Brundtland Report highlighted the need to unite the environment and humanity, emphasizing the necessity for human development that considers temporal and generational dimensions. It also stressed the integration of three pillars: society, environment, and economy.

This report led to the definition of sustainable development as an inclusive, environmentally friendly, and economically viable concept that considers the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (World Commission on Environment and Development [WCED], 1987). Sustainable development is based on the concepts of human needs and ecological limitations, thereby establishing itself as a framework for designing development strategies that transform the economy and society in accordance with the environment.

According to López (2015), the Brundtland report is a precedent regarding humanity’s sustainability challenge. From this milestone, the states organized within the United Nations have established objectives for the global pursuit of sustainable development alternatives. Between 2000 and 2015, countries defined the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and, in 2015, presented the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved by the end of the third decade of the 21st century.

One of the criticisms of the concept of sustainable development is the great difficulty in recognizing its practical usefulness on a territorial scale (Tapia, 2020). Gómez (2017) considers critical elements to be the lack of clarification of goals and objectives, the absence of data, and the precise delineation of responsibilities and commitments. This results in the failure to achieve the goals of the development agenda in a context where the concept of sustainable development has had little penetration in local communities and institutions.

Various countries adhering to the United Nations are committed to reporting their progress on the SDGs, but there is little evidence of achievements, as well as fragile public policy instruments, that is, with little or no coherence in formulation and impact evaluation. To measure progress concerning goals, it is necessary to have clarity on the social, environmental, and economic landscape through describable and distinguishable metrics or qualities, prior to the implementation of policy measures. This panorama or state of affairs is called the baseline, the starting point for executing actions that impact the purpose of public policy.

One point to consider when defining the baseline is understanding urbanity and rurality, two contexts with particular social, environmental, and economic values that maintain a spatial relationship in all aspects.

To address the needs and solve problems on a territorial scale, the context (whether urban or rural) shapes the conditions of human life and its activities, as well as the possibilities for development plans. For example, rural

poverty must be addressed from a different approach than urban poverty, especially regarding its conception and tools.

Current societies are characterized by their level of development according to the Human Development Index (HDI), which considers aspects of health, income, and education. The HDI is a macroeconomic indicator that presents the overall situation of a country; however, there are socio-territorial inequalities within countries. Indeed, the current challenge is to clarify and understand the types of inequality that are barriers to human development and the factors that give rise to them (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2019).

Sky et al. (2018) conclude that, in the face of globalization, changes in urban-rural relations have occurred, particularly concerning social inequality and land-use changes, driven by the rural exodus. The rise of economic activities in urban areas has drawn young inhabitants from rural zones to seek better conditions. This dynamic necessitates that local and national governments plan development on an urban and regional scale (this includes peri-urban and rural areas), because policy measures can lead to positive or negative consequences on land use.

“ The urban-rural relations are manifested in socioeconomic and environmental interactions among human beings or inhabitants settled in a territory with particular characteristics that allow distinguishing livelihoods and the environment. ”

The 21st century has been marked by the intensification of urbanization in countries, the disconnection from nature and rural activities, and the digital and technological revolution, mainly in major urban centers. However, issues such as socio-territorial inequality, climate change, food crises, among others, are beginning to steer humanity towards sustainability. For this reason, societies need to reflect on the importance of recognizing the value of territories and their functionalities to ensure a socio-environmental balance that transcends water, food, health, energy, and economic security.

The term security refers to the absence of risk or danger. At the state level, the preservation of social peace is filtered through the lens of satisfying the population's needs and guaranteeing fundamental rights. However, when discussing water, food, health, energy, and economic security, very few consider the determining factors and their spatial arrangement. For example, the water security of urban areas, which often contain contaminated water sources, depends on the quality of upstream ecosystems, where there is lower population density and demographic pressure. A large part of raw water intake occurs in areas minimally affected by urbanization; however, in practice, is there any form of compensation from urban to rural inhabitants?

It is not about reducing the rural areas to a space of provisioning or linear exchange. In this regard, Martínez (2017) points out that countries must overcome the view of rural areas as merely static reservoirs of resources for the city or as spaces subordinated to urban areas. In reality, it is necessary to value the rural space based on the dynamics within the territory and its horizontal interdependence with the urban area. For example, agricultural activity is no longer just about the production of food and raw materials. Their functions have diversified (structuring rural territories, conserving biodiversity, and controlling the unregulated urban expansion [Guzmán, 2010]). The new visions of rural areas integrate the supply of natural resources, leisure spaces, landscaping, and culture, which has generated greater complexity in terms of interconnection and dynamism (Pérez et al., 2009).

The relationships between urban and rural territories of these times must promote the exchange of human, natural, technological, infrastructure, financial, cultural, and informational resources. While there is usually a gap between urban and rural populations in terms of access to basic services and facilities for human development, it is necessary to overcome these limits and make room for the productive and economic inclusion of rural territories and their inhabitants. An alternative perspective is required that seeks unprecedented possibilities, considering the culture, to incorporate them into national and international dynamics through inclusion and participation (Samper, 2014).

On the urban side, cultural factors have also been decisive in the construction of sustainable cities, as they mitigate the pressure of economic competitiveness of modernity and give way to environmentally friendly patterns. Today, the attraction of city tourism for both nationals and foreigners is focused on public, cultural, and green spaces (Lezama and Domínguez, 2006). Cities with little territorial planning in these areas need to rethink, redesign, and implement projects to create recreational and leisure spaces such as plazas, parks, public markets, pedestrian pathways, and the conservation of local architecture, among others.

The purpose of the connection between territories is to enhance the quality of life for urban-rural inhabitants (children, adolescents, adults, and the elderly), without discrimination based on gender or ethnicity. The problems of development are related to territorial injustices in the social, environmental, and economic dimensions that can engender territorial conflicts related to resources (water, sanitation, precious metals, forests, etc.).

The dynamics and interconnections between urban and rural inhabitants can contribute to the distribution of resources and to the understanding of different realities and world views. Nevertheless, an institutional framework is required to guide and support these actions in order to ensure balanced negotiations that culminate in the socioeconomic and environmental recognition of the contributions made by populations and their territories for the sustainable development of the entire society.

According to Kalfas et al. (2023), the political actions of the State and institutions must manage land and associated resources based on local realities and customs, as well as the effects on ecosystems and social systems. Mensah and Casadevall (2019) emphasize the urgent need to formulate and implement social policies based on tolerance, social cohesion, and justice by enshrining universal human rights, inclusion, equity, and governance.

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## Conclusion

Territorial interdependence is an interesting concept for rethinking a country’s socioeconomic and environmental system, considering the population, its territory, and the benefits generated in both urban and rural areas. The approach is based on a scheme of reciprocity that perpetuates a dynamic of social welfare that is fair for the environment, urban and rural societies, and the economy.

There are fundamental functions that emerge and develop in rural areas, such as the production of food, raw materials, untreated water, energy, oxygen, and other goods and services from both managed and unmanaged ecosystems. From this perspective, the current conception of sustainable development must be based on the quality of socio-territorial relations and the goods and services that enable the proper functioning of systems within countries.

The understanding of the satisfaction of needs, depending on who or what provides them, can be an integrative element to foster mobility from urban to rural areas and vice versa. Rural territories also hold potential for attraction in terms of landscapes and natural and cultural resources to meet the needs of urban societies. In the same vein, they require urban leverage for local development and economic inclusion, primarily generated by the potential demand from urban areas.

Given this synergistic reality between the urban and rural areas, it is imperative to make a social recognition of the territories and their contributions to sustainable development. In this regard, local, district, provincial, and national governments play a leading role in urban and regional planning to include reciprocity measures aimed at promoting territorial development in urban, peri-urban, and rural areas. For this, the intervention of the State and local governments is required, as the policy of *laissez-faire* and the outcomes of the free market cannot be endorsed in a situation where adjustments are still pending, such as incorporating the environmental services provided by ecosystems into the market for social well-being and biodiversity conservation.

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