



Building bridges across the plurality of rural development research

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Contemporary rural development has been shaped by local and global social, political, economic, and environmental transformations that characterize the last several decades (Torre 2022). While the same could be said of cities, there appears to have been widespread acceptance that cities will each experience their own unique dynamics—while rural researchers and practitioners continue to argue for recognition of the diversity and uniqueness of rural realities. During the twentieth century, rural communities were characterized by dramatic emigration outflows, which contributed to a rapid demographic collapse and the subsequent withdrawal of necessary public services such as education, health, administration, and, quite paradoxically for communities where agriculture is a landscape landmark, increasing food security issues. At the turn of the twenty-first century, scholars began to highlight the diversity and resilience of rural communities in response to these dynamic forces. Rural places are increasingly presented as sites where open innovation does occur among a broad range of businesses, supported by the criticality of social capital as a neglected resource that the statistical needs of managerial governance often fails to fully capture.

Globally, we appear to have entered an era of ‘poly-crisis,’ with major shocks happening in rapid succession or simultaneously (Whiting 2023). For example, the so-called “subprime” crisis was rapidly followed by the “COVID-19” crisis, which has coincided with the “Ukrainian war” crisis, all happening in the shadow of increasingly volatile weather-related events driven by the “climate crisis”—with the cumulative impact highlighting the precariousness of the current economic

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system. The current economic system displays more signs of vulnerabilities than obvious signs of resilience and capacity to cope with all those changes (Normann and Vasström 2012; Shucksmith 2010). These vulnerabilities are associated with the over-centralization of decision-making both in public and private organizations, the systematic managerial reliance on quantitative indicators, and the uncritical domination of the economic sphere over the social and environmental spheres. Arguably, these characteristics of neoliberal capitalism are fanning the flames of the poly-crisis era.

Interestingly, in this context, attention has slowly and gently begun turning toward rural areas as places where solutions might be found to counteract the current complex web of challenges created by our dominant economic systems. Several authors in this special issue have highlighted the benefits of equitable rural–urban interactions. Such interactions replace extractive approaches, where resources are generally removed from rural regions to support urban economic growth, with two-way flows or exchanges. Equitable rural–urban dynamics require that each place acknowledges the priorities, inclinations, and needs of each other. In particular, the endowment of rural places with natural resources is an incredible lever for activating equitable, nature-based solutions that might support adaptation to and mitigation of climate change for rural and urban places alike. The meaningfulness of social connections in rural places, despite their lower population densities presumed associated challenges to traditional notions of agglomeration benefits, is another source of renewed attention, especially through the concept of commons or public goods. The commodification of the world, sometimes described as a process of colonization of the public and collective spheres by the private sphere, where value is converted into monetary value and cornered by an elite, highlights the need for the regulation of market mechanisms as a means to counter the rise of inequalities and the depletion of natural ecosystems (Liu 2022; Sankar 2022). Rural places may be promising sites of resistance to the colonization of the public and collective spheres simply by insisting that local assets benefit local communities. As such, the resurgence of interest in the commons is not a coincidence. Experience has now shown that access to resources involves an ethical dimension where issues of equity, sustainability, and desirability must be accounted for; democratic processes must be designed and applied to secure inclusiveness both within places and among places, while creating room for political decision-making that reflects the priorities of inhabitants' concerns and aspirations for their place of residence.

This short introduction, and the collection of contributions that follows, underlines the duality of the world we live in and experience everyday, and the way scholars and practitioners from different regions and disciplines attempt to reveal and make sense of this world. The entanglement of intangible and tangible dimensions produces consequences for both the material and imaginative opportunities available for rural places to find meaningful current and future pathways to their desired futures. The tangible dimension, which deals with the materiality of the world, concretely impacts lives. The outcomes of the actions we implement in everyday life can contribute to or subtract from one's happiness, feelings of satisfaction, completion, and attainment. In this perspective, the autonomy and capacity of decision-makers are connected to the genuine use of resources to reach goals, generate income, cope

with change, respond to threats... Those actions stem from belief and value systems which underly decision-making processes. Experience, successes, and errors contribute to updating held beliefs, strengthening what works, and modifying what does not. The interactions among tangible and intangible dimensions are well illustrated in this special issue of *The Annals of Regional Science* and appear in discussions on the appearance and the essence of agritourism, the tangible and intangible assets used to capture value, the connection between identity and the physical environment, the material and immaterial resources engaged in an innovation process, as well as the philosophies underlying multi-level governance.

Before jumping to the presentation of the content of this special issue, we would like to emphasize that the design of this special issue has been guided by an effort to illustrate the fuzziness and pluridisciplinarity of rural development as a research field. It encompasses many theoretical, conceptual, and methodological approaches. The richness of rural development approaches is legitimated by the diversity of stakes embedded in rural areas. On the one hand, this richness has led to the emergence of specialized scientific communities over time and space that conduct innovative and original research on particular aspects of rurality and rural development. On the other hand, this richness has also led to the structuration of scientific communities that cannot necessarily communicate with each other due to the utilization of specific concepts that are not shared by other communities. These fissures can appear along industrial, sectoral, disciplinary, institutional, and geographical lines. The goal of this special issue is begin the project of building bridges across these factions and explore three conceptual approaches that are widely spread among European and North American rural researchers: community-based research, territorial research, and place-based research. The objective is to reflect on the existing linkages between these conceptual approaches while discussing the barriers that prevent more collaboration or stronger integration of lessons learned in one sphere to another. The motivation is to enrich each conceptual approach by highlighting their strengths and weaknesses in order to avoid a misleading interchangeable utilization. The contributions that follow tackle diverse issues covering a wide variety of rural development conceptualizations from different regions around the world. This special issue intends to build on diverse materials such as critical case studies, methodological explorations, conceptual discussions, and theoretical investigations. The current mix of theoretical and empirical contributions brings a complete perspective of the stakes while facilitating their understanding through complementary approaches.

1 Content of this journal special issue

The diversity of topics currently under investigation in rural areas is well reflected in this journal special issue. Overall, this special issue includes research conducted in both Europe and North America, sometimes with connections to the Global South. The set of articles also tackle both theoretical and empirical issues, highlighting the necessary dialogue between these two dimensions of research activities. Although

qualitative research is more represented, the results tend to highlight the possibility of genuinely combining qualitative and quantitative research for improving the quality of results. Remarkably, researchers at every stage of an academic career have contributed to this special issue, emphasizing the contemporaneity, and probably also the criticality, of rural development issues.

The first paper by Akimowicz et al. provides an extensive review of the literature which suggests the existence of a nexus framed by three conceptual approaches commonly used by rural researchers: the community-based approach, the place-based approach, and the territorial approach. After a historic perspective on the emergence of these three approaches, the authors discuss more extensively the respective governance challenges and opportunities related to each approach. In addition to reminding readers about the necessity of developing interdisciplinary research to tackle the complexity of rural issues, the authors highlight the key and intertwined role of geographic contexts, actors' agency, and strategic planning. This nexus further highlights the embeddedness of individuals in social groups, themselves embedded in a specific environmental context. The embeddedness of rural communities could therefore be leveraged to design new development pathways centered on a care mindset, instead of an extractive mindset.

The model designed by Galliano et al., which explores the influence of spatial externalities on the dynamics of eco-innovation, sheds light on the specificities of rural businesses as opposed to their (peri-)urban counterparts. After distinguishing three spatial externalities, i.e., specialization, related variety, and unrelated variety, the authors use firm level data extracted from the French Community Innovation Survey to analyze the dynamics of eco-innovation. Their results show that the enticement to eco-innovate of a rural business is fostered by both regional specialization and the presence of unrelated businesses, whereas related businesses negatively affect this engagement. However, the results also show that once engaged in a process of eco-innovation, the presence of related businesses positively impacts the breadth of eco-innovation of a business, whereas unrelated businesses have negative impacts. These results highlight a specific dynamic of eco-innovation in rural areas where the composition of local economic communities critically drives capacities to circularize local economies. Sustainable policymaking may require to accommodate a balanced share of related and unrelated local businesses.

Dervillé then introduces the idea of sectoral communities to discuss the contribution of communities to institutional changes. Her review of the institutional economics literature aims to design a dynamic and multi-level conceptual framework where communities maintain nested relationships with other institutions such as the Market and the State. Her work produces critical insights into shared representations and governance structures that result in the formation of collective resources, the design of productive solutions, and the negotiation of exchange values. The comparative analysis of the French and German dairy sectors, understood as sectoral communities, highlights the key role of intangible property rights and resources, e.g., information, reputation, innovation capacities. While the French dairy sector moved from national standards to local alternatives, the regional organization of the German dairy sector was strengthened. These evolutions underline the economic relevance

of quality definition among community members based on payoff potentials, social trust, capacities to design rules and invest in monitoring systems.

Streifeneder et al. then tackles the evolution of agritourism in south Tyrol in Austria, a European region characterized by fast the rise of tourism. Their extensive literature review leads first to distinguishing between authentic agritourism, which provides additional income to farmers, from a countryside tourism, which relies on a rural idyll and pays little attention to farming. Their utilization of the concept of authenticity to explore the tension between market opportunities and heritage preservation highlights the ties which connect individuals and societies with places. Interestingly, the case study based on the analysis of superior agritouristic facilities further illustrates the critical role of digital technologies in rural areas. Their results demonstrate a commodification of rural authenticity characterized by an absence of agricultural realities. In this case, digital technologies both facilitate access to information about rural places, while it also contributes to strengthening and propagating stereotypical clichés about an imaginary rural idyll.

Laidin and Berriet-Sollicie have attempted to provide an analytical framework to better grasp the logic behind the evolution of rural development policies and their articulation at different governance levels, using the concepts of repertoire and paradigm. The seven identified repertoires are grouped into three paradigms which frame public action and stakeholders' narratives: modernization, cohesion, and greening. The authors highlight successive moves from a situation where rural development appears dependent on urban areas, to attempts to promote cohesive developments, to the perception of complementarities between urban and rural areas. This evolution appears mediated by the consolidation of a more holistic approach which includes social and natural environment in stakeholders' narratives. The application of the framework to the French context highlights the critical role of a well-articulated multi-level governance and raises the question of the impact of the new Common Agricultural Policy on the future of rural development approaches.

Finally, Perez looked more closely at the territorial connections that exist among the Mayangna indigenous people in Nicaragua and the material environment within which they live. The top-down implementation of geographic borders for the demarcation of the Biosphere Reserve of Bosawas has deeply disrupted the ways of living of the Mayangna people. Noting the diverging impacts of market failures and governmental policies in different places, she focuses more specifically on the significant discordances that exist among knowledge systems in regard to resources extraction, environmental protection, and development. Based on a case study, she sheds light on the struggles of the Mayangnas for their physical and cultural survival using the Mi'kmaw framework of Two-eyed seeing developed further North in today's Canada. The application of the Mi'kmaw approach emphasizes the complementarity of different epistemologies and brings forward important insights on the adaptation and integration of Indigenous research epistemologies and methodologies. Perez's work highlights that the inclusion, and integration of divergent world views may trigger more effective approaches to sustainability that incorporate holistic rural development strategies, policies, and practices.

2 Conclusion and future perspectives

This special issue highlights several research perspectives which may become key issues in future research debates.

First, as researchers and practitioners alike search for different and more holistic accounts of rural sustainability, the inclusion of a heritage dimension may contribute to a better integration of equity and durability issues. Second, the exploration of the intangible dimension and the attention paid to the autonomy of rural residents introduces the importance of consideration the emotional aspects of decision-making as they influence rural policy and development.

Current approaches to and pathways for rural development are largely argued to be unsustainable by the contributors to this special issue. This is attributed, in significant part, to the ongoing managerial approach to rural policy and development by state actors. In this approach, resources are considered as input for production processes where resources can be substituted. Their substitution implies a lack of consideration for their exhaustion. The managerial approach is an extractive approach which relies on a flow analysis that consists in securing the inflow of input at a low cost. A more sustainable approach requires acknowledging, integrating, and planning for the fact that the extraction of resources may lead to their exhaustion or to significant negative externalities, and emphasis on the finite and limited nature of such resources and the costs of their extraction in human and ecological terms. In this perspective, the focus is not just on the flow of resources but on the stock of resources and their inherent, non-commercial value (Calvo-Mendieta et al. 2010; Salmon and Akimowicz 2022). Natural resources are not just fodder for capital in the present context; they represent a legacy to pass on to the next generations and critical components in broader natural systems. Therefore, the governance of natural—and often rurally based resources—involves an ethical thinking for both intra-generational and inter-generational equity, as well as place-based equity. Moreover, the utilization of resources can also include non-human entities which thrive on the existence of other natural elements. This perspective involves disrupting legal considerations, an undertaking beyond the scope of this special issue but which appears to be slowly making inroads, as illustrated by the legal status of Lake Erie in the United States and many other examples around the world. This stock of resources is sometimes referred to as a patrimony or a heritage, despite the semantic limitations of those two terms. The design of an adequate concept may help to better implement this conceptual gap, and regional scientists would do well to consider Indigenous perspectives, theory, and methodologies as critical to advancing this goal.

The effort to view human and non-human entities as parts of an integrated system that must be appropriately valued and balanced to support satisfying, vibrant, and sustainable lives invites reconsideration of rural policymaking. Focusing on the inhabitants of rural areas as key agents in navigating and balancing this system requires greater emphasis on equity, rather than specious or deficit-based approaches that see rural people and places as inherently lacking in comparison with urban people or places. Rurality is not ‘poorly done urbanism’—it is its own unique domain of consideration. Further, rural inhabitants are not only hedonistic consumers but

individuals who attempt to enjoy life while avoiding suffering—just like their urban counterparts. In this perspective, the inclusion of the tangible and intangible dimensions of rural development, underlined earlier in this introduction, is key to producing accurate and meaningful insights into rural life. Indeed, rural inhabitants are not only looking for material goods; they are also looking for satisfying socio-psychological needs (Ballet et al. 2004; Ballet and Mahieu 2022). Such a stance is not neutral and involves major changes in policymaking, as exemplified in policies aiming to reduce poverty. While the first stance implies that a sole increase in income may contribute to reduce poverty through the consumption of goods and services and may foster dependence, the second stance implies the criticality of addressing, valuing, and supporting the agency and autonomy which characterizes human beings. In this stance, access issues are key to increasing the autonomy of individuals, thereby giving them the means to respond to their needs and wishes. This capacity *to do* contributes to the capacity *to be*, that is to say to act autonomously. The experience of identity by rural inhabitants as well as the dynamic and diverse nature of the identity of rural places are key parameters for a sustainable and equitable approaches to policy and development in rural places.

This goal of supporting sustainable, vibrant, and diverse rural places invites consideration of a broad range of perspectives, orientations, and disciplines. One of our central goals in bringing together this special issue was to weave together a sample of such diversity to continue promoting the importance of keeping our minds and scholarly endeavors open to new possibilities and intersections, as well as to tease out the distinctions that different approaches highlight—something that can be lost when considering rural places from singular sectoral lenses or from one discipline or another. Opening the field of regional science to include such diversity is important for the future of rural research. It has been our pleasure to have humbly contributed to opening such an extensive field of research by collecting and sharing these contributions in this special issue, with gratitude to The Annals of Regional Science for welcoming our ideas. We are aware that this initial step is far from exhausting all the question marks that surround the field of rural development. We hope the dialogue fostered by this initiative may lead to exciting new opportunities in regional science and rural research by building bridges among all those like us who are fascinated by and dedicated to supporting rural people and places.

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