

Revisiting Rural–Urban Transformations and Small Town Development in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract After decades of academic and policy scepticism on the role of urbanisation in economic, social and cultural change, the issue is attracting renewed academic focus and political attention. Such interest was also evident during the 1990s, and in this paper the authors revisit the debate with specific attention to Sub-Saharan Africa. The paper discusses the continuing challenges on classifications, and suggests that small towns should be considered on the basis of their functions and in the context of rural–urban transformations. Turning to the current debates, it is highlighted how small town development has attracted renewed interest not only in development economics, but also research into the rush for land, mining, conflict and climate change. These trends are fleshed out in a focussed presentation of the six papers on small town development in Sub-Saharan Africa that make up this special issue of the *European Journal of Development Research*. Based on the arguments and findings of the papers, it is recommended that small towns are best seen as ‘outcomes’ of rural economic development. Accordingly, the renewed interest in

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urbanisation, formalised in the New Urban Agenda and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11, needs to address rural–urban synergies as integral to urbanisation dynamics.

Résumé Après plusieurs décennies de scepticisme académique et politique à propos du rôle de l’urbanisation en tant que facteur de changement économique, social et culturel, l’urbanisation est maintenant le centre d’un intérêt académique et politique renouvelé. Dans cet article, les auteurs reviennent sur cet intérêt (qui était évident aussi dans les années 1990s) avec une attention particulière à l’Afrique sub-Saharienne. On examine les défis suscités par les classifications, et on propose que les petites localités soient considérés en base à leurs fonctions et dans le contexte des transformations rurales-urbaines. Ensuite, passant aux débats plus actuels, on souligne comment le développement des petites localités et villages est d’intérêt pour les recherches en: économie du développement; la ruée sur les terres; l’exploitation minière; les conflits; le changement climatique. Ces tendances sont analysés à travers six études - qui forment cette édition spéciale du *European Journal of Development Research* - sur le développement des petites localités dans l’Afrique sub-Saharienne. En base aux résultats de ces études, on recommande que les petits localités et villages soient considérées comme une partie organique du milieu rurale ou elles sont localisées, et pas forcément comme issus du développement économique rurale. Par conséquent, le renouvellement de l’intérêt dans l’urbanisation, officialisé dans la nouvelle Agenda urbaine et le SDG11 (le onzième objectif de développement durable), doit aborder les synergies rurales-urbaines en tant que partie intégrale des nouvelles dynamiques d’urbanisation.

Introduction

After decades of academic and policy scepticism on the role of urbanisation in economic, social and cultural change, academic and political sentiments are shifting. The growing consensus on the positive correlation between urbanisation and economic growth underpins the new global development agenda, including the New Urban Agenda and the 11th Sustainable Development Goal aiming to ‘make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable’ (UN 2015). Much emphasis is put on inclusive urban development that ‘leaves no one behind’ (McGranahan et al. 2016).

In its demographic definition, urbanisation is an increase in the proportion of the population living in urban areas, which in turn is driven by natural urban population growth, the reclassification of settlements from rural to urban and most importantly by rural dwellers moving to cities and towns. The latter reflects the shrinking share of agriculture in national gross domestic product (GDP) and employment, and the related growth of industry and service sectors, which are typically more productive and tend to be located in urban centres where they benefit from agglomeration economies.



There is, however, much concern about the pace of urbanisation and the capacity of national and local governments to manage it. As the UN's 2013 World Population Policies report states, "among 185 countries with available data in 2013, 80% of governments had policies to lower rural to urban migration, an increase from 38% in 1996" (UN-DESA 2013). This proportion is even higher, at 84 %, among low- and middle-income nations that are currently undergoing urban transitions, most of them in Africa and Asia (UN-DESA 2013). This disconnect between the more positive view of urbanisation on the one hand, and the mounting apprehension about rural–urban migration on the other hand, overlooks the fact that the latter reflects profound transformations in the rural 'space', which in turn are central to the understanding of the nature and pace of urban transitions. It also raises questions on whether 'leaving no one behind' is at all possible with a narrow, exclusive focus on either urban or rural domains.

Small and intermediate urban centres have long been seen as potentially offering opportunities for regional development encompassing urban and rural areas, people and enterprises. The articles in this special issue of the *European Journal of Development Research* were originally prepared for the international conference Rural–Urban Connections in Sub-Saharan Africa held in Copenhagen in January 2016 as the closing event of the EU-funded RurbanAfrica project (www.rurban.ku.dk/) to explore important aspects of small town development in a range of Sub-Saharan African nations. The papers focus on changes in rural economies and the growing significance of income diversification, migration and multi-local living and how these rural–urban transformations intersect with market dynamics and the provision of services in small towns. In this editorial, we provide a backdrop to the papers, starting with key definitions and a summary of current debates. Professor Jonathan Baker's seminal work has been hugely influential in shaping the latter, and we gratefully acknowledge his constructive and critical voice as advisor to the RurbanAfrica Project. Sadly, Jonathan passed away before the publication of this special issue, and we are honoured to be able to include here his article into which he put the last of his remarkable energy.

Small Towns and Rural–Urban Linkages

The increasing academic and policy interest in urban centres other than large cities is noteworthy, although such interest has also been evident since the 1990s (Agergaard et al. 2009; Baker 1990; Baker and Pedersen 1992; Kelly 1998; Lindert and Verkoren 1997; Pedersen 1990, 1997; Rigg 1998; Satterthwaite and Tacoli 2006; Tacoli 2003, 2006). In part, this interest is fuelled by the urban transition and the recognition that currently close to 60 % of the world's urban dwellers are estimated to live in small and medium-sized urban centres with fewer than 1 million inhabitants (UN-DESA 2018). If we include all urban settlements classified as urban by national governments, and with fewer than half a million inhabitants, then by 2015 around 196 million people in Sub-Saharan Africa lived in small urban centres, more than half the total urban population and about one-fifth of the total population (Satterthwaite 2016). But such categorisation is far too wide and inevitably hides



the great differences within and across regions and between urban centres of, say, 20,000 and 499,999 residents.

An alternative classification includes urban centres of up to 50,000 inhabitants as small towns (UCLG 2017). This categorisation shows important inter- and intra-regional demographic diversity. In Africa, 26 % of the urban population lives in such small towns. This average, however, hides significant differences between East and West Africa, both with more than 30 % of the urban population living in small towns, and Central Africa, where this share is only 13 % (UCLG 2017). Moreover, while the population limit of 50,000 provides a better definition of small towns, even this categorisation is problematic because of the very large differences in how national governments define urban centres. Population thresholds, the most common criterion, vary from a few hundred inhabitants to 20,000; in practice, this means that in the first case all settlements from a few hundred to 50,000 are included, whereas in the second case only those between 20,000 and 50,000 are included. In addition, some governments add criteria such as administrative functions, available services and share of non-agricultural employment to their definitions.

This diversity in definitions makes comparisons difficult. Hence, for analytical purposes, it may be more useful to consider small towns on the basis of their functions, including the provision of services, facilities and infrastructure to their population and that of their surrounding region. These functions are largely shaped by the wider national and sub-national (regional) urban systems rather than by population size, and especially by administrative arrangements, including decentralisation or lack of it.

Small town functions are closely related to, and to some extent reflect, the linkages and interactions between ‘rural’ and ‘urban’. However, complexity and diversity are fundamental characteristics of rural–urban linkages, which are better defined as constantly evolving webs of connections between rural and urban spaces and dimensions, rather than a linear relationship. But to be a useful concept for policy, rural–urban linkages also need to be defined as clearly as possible.

While rural–urban linkages are usually defined as the spatial movement and exchange of goods, people, money and information, they also have a structural dimension. The latter refers to exchanges and interactions between economic sectors, such as the manufacturing of inputs for agriculture and the processing, transport and distribution of agricultural goods. Understanding and supporting positive rural–urban interactions require the combination of spatial and sectoral dimensions. From this perspective, small towns embody sectoral exchanges within a specific location in space.

Small Towns in Current Debates

There are several reasons for the renewed interest in the role of small towns in regional and national development. Besides demographic considerations, economic growth and reducing migration to larger cities are increasingly important. In comparison with large-scale metropolises, small towns are often considered as safe and liveable urban environments with higher quality of urban life and greater potential



for inclusivity. The growth of small towns has been explicitly promoted by local, national and international policies (see for instance the New Urban Agenda).

Small towns play a critical role in the debates on ‘structural transformation’, intended as the transition from largely agrarian economies (with most of the population engaged in farming) to service economies (with most of the population engaged in manufacturing and services). This process is already well underway: globally, since about 1980, the share of the economically active population engaged in industry and services has exceeded that employed in agriculture (Satterthwaite 2007). Currently, only about one-third of the world population is employed in agriculture. Such profound changes typically involve people moving out of rural areas and to urban centres where non-farm employment concentrates (Losch et al. 2012; McMillan and Headey 2014). Christiaensen and Todo (2014) define this as the ‘missing middle’—the share of the population moving out of agriculture into non-farm activities and informal jobs in the construction, transport or commercial sectors in small towns, which may also gradually increase their importance as regional nodes. These rural–urban transformation processes are thus closely linked to urbanisation dynamics, and to the potential role of small towns in supporting local economic development and poverty alleviation by for instance attracting rural migrants who would otherwise move to larger cities in search of employment (Christiaensen and Kanbur 2018; de Brauw et al. 2014; Hazell et al. 2007; Losch et al. 2012).

During the past decade, the complex urbanisation process and the role of small town development have also been approached from a demographic viewpoint. The Sahel and West Africa Club (SWAC) group in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) have used geo-spatial data to detect urbanisation trends in West Africa for the past 60 years and importantly shown the huge diversities in size, function, distribution and economic potential of small towns that conventional population statistics do not pick up (Curiel 2017; Fox et al. 2018). Other studies have highlighted how agricultural production systems and mining are often important drivers of small town development, showing that their dependence on global markets makes them susceptible to boom and bust dynamics (Bryceson et al. 2012; Jönsson and Bryceson 2017; Nchito 2010). A new driver of rural transformation and urbanisation is the non-local investors’ rush for land and the connected land use change that can contribute to the marginalisation of low-income groups (Zoomers et al. 2016, 2017).

Recent research has also shown that conflict, violence and militarisation can be powerful drivers of urbanisation dynamics, where villages grow into towns and become safe places, which in turn contributes to ongoing struggles between different interest groups over power and control, as the paper by Büscher in this special issue shows. Small town development has also attracted some attention in the growing scholarship on climate change adaptation. In this context, it is explored how the embeddedness of small towns in the rural economy will provide in situ adaptation to households affected by environmental crises and unpredictability (Wisner et al. 2015). However, what may be the advantages of small towns in relation to their self-organisation and local decision-making may also be their disadvantages because of the political and economic neglect of national governments (Wisner et al. 2015).



The Papers

Taking these changing dimensions of small town development as a starting point of analysis, the papers in this special issue revisit and update our knowledge of the dynamics of rural–urban linkages and the emergence and role of small towns. The first paper, by Steel et al., examines the changing role of rural–urban linkages and transformations in small town development in Africa from a livelihood perspective. Building on research at 10 different research sites in Tanzania, Rwanda, Ghana and Cameroon, the comparative analysis of agricultural commercialisation and the expansion of large-scale production reveals how this has triggered intensified rural–urban interactions and livelihood diversification. The paper shows how different kinds of multi-locality and multi-activity develop and accelerate an almost universal process of rural urbanisation in which small towns and emerging urban centres become important nodes where the rural and urban come together. In this way, small towns are becoming attractive for a variety of actors ranging from rural dwellers, who see more opportunities to stay in the region, as well as external investors and urban residents, who see increased opportunities for farm- and non-farm-related business activities in the rural region. The paper concludes that “urbanisation can no longer be considered to be the outcome of a unidirectional movement from rural to urban areas; it has instead been shaped by a chain of connections in which rural and urban livelihoods interact on a movement continuum and in which small towns have become an important reference point in the urbanisation chain.” Following this argument, the paper demonstrates the immense diversity in small town development.

Diversity in small town development is also highlighted in the next paper, by Lazaro et al. The authors explore how rural Tanzania is urbanising by comparing settlement growth and local economic development in four emerging urban centres. The paper shows how the four settlements follow different trajectories based on their historical and geographical characteristics and their respective crop value-chain dynamics, in particular following liberalisation policies in the early 1990s. The paper also illustrates how diverse natural characteristics and perishability of crops require very different logistics of production and how this has direct implications for settlement growth. At the same time, it shows that settlements continue to attract migrants and investments gradually disassociated from the dominating crop economy that nurtured the growth. As such, the paper clearly indicates that small town development is not only diverse but also path dependent. Although following different trajectories, all settlements are involved in complex administrative re-classification processes, where they as small towns, following the functional definition outlined above, have become parts of larger administrative units, namely townships. Township status was announced during the 2000s, but none of them have gained full administrative independence and therefore mainly follow rural governance. In this way, the Tanzanian case is a good example of how small towns develop and consolidate despite inertia in government systems.

Thus, while settlement growth in rural Tanzania is not a planned process, the third paper, by Baker, shows how, in Ethiopia, small town development has been



promoted by administrative reforms. The paper explores rapid growth of numerous small towns over the country and zooms in on the particular case of Bora. Baker explains how, since the early 2000s, state building structured around ethnic federalism has formed a developmental state that actively promotes an ‘urban’ alternative to a rural-based economy. Policies in support of urbanisation and decentralisation have led to urban re-classifications and huge infrastructural investments which have changed Bora from being a relatively isolated place when studied in 2003 to a politically powerful town when re-studied in 2013. Baker emphasises that role of the state in Bora’s transition from rural to urban, but also argues that the ways in which Bora has become a town are based on blended rural and urban livelihoods. In this context, the paper highlights how the introduction of *khat* (an intoxicant known from Northeast Africa) as prime commercial crop has also benefited from growing urban consumption in response to the culturally influenced decline of beer drinking. This process is exemplified by the description of different typologies of households and their livelihoods based on a blend of urban and rural resources.

That small town development is not equally beneficial to all households is an issue discussed in the fourth paper, by Ortenblad et al. Taking the Njombe region of Tanzania as point of departure, the paper explores how the changing connections between the growing regional town and the rural hinterland are shaping patterns of rural transformations. The paper illustrates how the increased demand for Irish potatoes has impacted on agricultural practices and rural livelihoods, involving changing mobility patterns, livelihood diversification and socio-economic mobility. The strengthened rural–urban connections characterised by intensification and commercialisation of agricultural activities, and the diversification of household activity portfolios, are bringing economic growth to and new opportunities for several rural households. Nevertheless, while it is evident that these transformations offer new opportunities for livelihood improvements, the actual realisation of these depends on a number of socio-economic and spatial circumstances. Those authors suggest that barriers to entering remunerative and accumulating household activities (such as access to land, human capital and productive assets, as well as age, gender etc.) are excluding a relatively large proportion of the poorer rural dwellers from benefiting from the intensified rural–urban connections. The paper clearly shows that rural transformation and small town development trigger new dimensions of social inequalities. These findings point to the importance of understanding who are the winners and losers of intensified rural–urban connections and how this is captured by place-based interventions.

The importance of developing regional planning policies that acknowledge the close relationship between small town development and their rural hinterland is also the argument of the fifth paper, by Karg et al. In their paper, the authors focus on periodic market systems in northern Ghana, where they highlight the growing importance of small town development and rural–urban transformation processes. The paper analyses how the development trajectories of small towns are linked to the historical rootedness of local markets and the characteristics of the commodity chains they host. The regional embeddedness of market systems and its direct link with the agricultural value chain have offered opportunities for the diversification



of the local economy and improvements in communications, transport and financial infrastructures. Thus, as argued by Lazaro et al., small town development is a historical and spatially contingent process. In parallel with the paper of Steel et al., where not the commodities but the people were followed, this paper shows that the continued development in market-linked sectors in these towns has intensified rural–urban linkages and increased connections between small towns and agricultural activities.

In the final paper, Büscher explores rural–urban transformation in the context of conflict-driven politics and economics. In the paper, the author illustrates how rural villages in the Kivu Province of DRC develop into boom town urbanisation driven by people’s search for protection and livelihoods. The term ‘boom town urbanisation’ suggests sudden growth, characterised by rapid demographic, economic and spatial growth of rural villages. The rapid growth and conflict context of small town development is exemplified in three contexts: trading, mining and internal displacement, and it is explained how the continued growth challenges existing contested claims over authority and control. Thus, boom town urbanisation in DRC is both produced by and the producer of political and military struggles, while they are also places that offer livelihood opportunities. This intersection of conflict–peace dynamics and economic dynamics is, according to Büscher, what needs to be included in the international mobilisation around peace building in the region, which so far has missed out in understanding the role of small town development. However, while boom town development needs to be acknowledged, the author emphasises that any attempts to reinforce their urban capacities shall be approached as a political rather than technical process. In doing so, Büscher’s paper nicely captures the importance of and complexities in governance of Africa’s rural–urban transformations.

Small Towns and the Governance of Rural–Urban Transformations

The papers in this special issue all confirm that, in Sub-Saharan Africa, small towns are thriving. In this respect, they share at least one key element: the added value produced through functional linkages (for instance, processing of agricultural produce) is retained and reinvested locally, where with appropriate institutional support, it serves as the engine of local economic development. However, small towns may also stagnate and decline. Thus, small town development is not always a success that guarantees continued growth, suggesting that generalisations should be treated with caution.

While most of the papers have shown how small towns’ economies depend largely on natural resources, it has also been shown how they are driven by processes of administrative re-classifications, demographic growth, and conflict and crisis. It has also been exemplified how migrants’ returns and remittances, and investments from foreigners and urban dwellers interact with or substitute the importance of rural-based economic dynamics; as Baker argues, agency plays a central role in forming livelihoods and small town development. However, as highlighted by Ortenblad et al. and several of the other papers, small town development and intensified rural–urban linkages do not necessarily benefit all equally. Thus, ‘leaving no



one behind' as emphasised in SDG 11 certainly applies as an important policy focus when dealing with small town development.

The examples of small town development in Sub-Saharan Africa presented in this issue clearly demonstrate that small towns are best seen as organic parts of the rural region where they are located, albeit not necessarily as 'outcomes' of rural economic development as suggested by the scholarship on 'structural transformation' and 'rural transformation'. The papers testify that small town development rests on path-dependent trajectories and therefore should be understood as a diverse process that is not easily captured by uniform economic models. Rural–urban connections are ever changing, and we suggest that the urbanisation process towards the bottom of the urban rank-size distribution will be best captured by the term 'rural–urban transformations'.

This is not only a matter of semantics, but points to the importance of developing policies and governance systems that aim at improving rural–urban synergies. Policies must be responsive to new economic opportunities as they emerge along the rural–urban continuum. In order to ensure that the more vulnerable and low-income groups can benefit from these dynamics and do not lose out, policies should explicitly support such groups. At the national level, sectoral ministries and urban and rural policies need better integration. At the same time, greater capacity is needed at the local level. Effectively, this implies decentralised planning, which in turn requires stronger capacity and resources for local governments.

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