

Rural revitalisation — A key to urban-rural land linkages

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SUMMARY

One reason for rural abandonment was the increasing attractiveness of urban areas, which means that it has been economically more attractive to work and live in urban areas. Cities are growing with the ever-increasing use of land for build-up areas. But as cities grow, there are benefits and increasing problems of agglomeration. Strengthening rural areas by revitalisation promotes the relative attractiveness of rural areas. Being “rural” has many benefits, not only limitations. With the improvement of infrastructure, local supplies, education facilities, internet etc., people in rural areas can also have sound living and working conditions. And rural residents can even have better life quality because of the more supportive personal relationships and ecological conditions, which can free cities from expanding and boost urban health and well-being. The purposes of this paper are to provide a brief critique of the theoretical concepts and methods of rural revitalisation from various viewpoints; to present an understanding of the urban-rural land linkages concept, and to suggest how rural-revitalisation can be applied to enhance urban-rural land linkages to the benefits of urban and rural areas. The paper presents a better understanding of rural revitalisation and urban-rural land linkages. It suggests eight ways of ensuring that the rural space is linked to urban spaces in ways that benefit both.

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1. RURAL REVITALISATION AND URBAN-RURAL LAND LINKAGES IN AN URBANISING WORLD

The changing structure of rural settlements has been a source of concern to scholars and policymakers for some time (Gladwin et al., 1989; Hoggart & Paniagua, 2001; Tu et al., 2018). Governments and non-governmental stakeholders have shown interest in finding ways to deal with the welfare of rural areas (Azam, 2019; Arslan et al., 2021). In western economies (such as Europe and North America), the dwindling income and employment caused by declines in agriculture and other natural resource-based industries (and manufacturing) have left few rural areas and sectors of the rural economy seeking revitalisation (Gladwin et al., 1989; Zhou et al., 2020). In developing countries, apart from the socioeconomic effects of rural neglect, rural areas suffer from structural land fragmentations, resource mismanagement and poor sense of place (Chigbu et al., 2022).

In addition to the rural problem, many countries worldwide (developed or developing countries) must deal with the burgeoning urbanisation challenge. Their focus on urban development has, in most cases, led to the neglect of rural development. This means that the concern for rural development must be addressed alongside a huge urban problem. And doing this requires tackling the development disconnections that exist between rural and urban development (Mishra & Agarwal, 2019). In doing this, Chigbu (2021: p. 6) calls for a framework for improving *urban-rural land linkages* (also, see Magel & Chigbu, 2022).

Urban-rural land linkages represent a concept that focuses on the land concepts, principles and frameworks for action toward interdependent development of urban-rural spaces based on land management principles and practices. This is usually reflected in a “relationship between rural and urban development” based on “interactions driven by structures of land ownership, land use, space utilisation, property rights and general interests people and organisations have in land and natural resources.” Rural revitalisation involves a systematic (usually comprehensive) measure for strengthening the rural settlement and its economy (Yang et al., 2021; Ingerpuu, 2022). In the early stages of the strategy, the government may be in a dominant position. It presents a series of policies and offers some financial support. In the subsequent phase, businesses use that policy support to promote rural development. With the continuous promotion and development of the rural revitalisation strategy, in the late stage, rural residents

actively engage in production activities to improve the employment structure (Buzinde et al., 2020; Nugroho & Numata, 2020; Xu & Fang, 2019).

The purposes of this paper are (1) to provide a brief critique of theoretical concepts and methods of rural revitalisation from various viewpoints; (2) to present an understanding of the urban-rural land linkages concept; and (3) to suggest how rural revitalisation can be applied to enhance urban-rural land linkages to the benefits of urban and rural areas. The questions addressed in this exploratory paper include (1) What is rural revitalisation? (2) What are urban-rural land linkages? And (3) how can rural revitalisation serve as a strategy for improving rural-urban land linkages? A better understanding of these questions should be helpful to suggest efforts at rural revitalisation areas to deal with rural problems while ensuring that the rural space is linked to urban spaces in ways that are beneficial to both. To answer the questions mentioned above, this paper is structured as follows. The next section outlines rural revitalisation and why it is essential in the broader development agenda. Section 3 describes urban-rural land linkages as a condition that needs strengthening. The section 4, rural revitalisation, steps for improving rural-urban land linkages through rural revitalisation. Section 5 outlines the main conclusions and policy implications of using rural revitalisation as a measure for boosting urban-rural land linkages.

2. WHY RURAL REVITALISATION SHOULD MATTER IN THE BROADER DEVELOPMENT AGENDA

Where people live constitute an influential factor affecting all aspects of their lives and living conditions. Rural areas, in most places around the world, remain the centres of national cultures, traditions and heritage. They are also placing agriculture because most of a rural population practice agriculture (as in the Global South) or most land use is under agriculture (as in the Global North). The Global South is known to have extensive problems of land grabbing, food insecurity, cultural loss, extreme poverty, and climate change insensitivity, among many others (Chigbu, 2015). These problems affect rural areas. However, rural areas everywhere have some common challenges. They have the infrastructure, jobs, and socio-cultural and environmental issues. These challenges are what rural development aims to resolve. According to Chigbu (2012: p. 212):

- The infrastructural (living) aims hinge on achieving adequate infrastructural provisions that uphold better living conditions for rural people.
- The jobs/agricultural aim focus on improving agricultural productivity, better measures of securing livelihoods through direct marketing of farm products and building sustainable cottages for rural industry.

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- The environmental/ecological aim entails redeveloping and re-naturalising rural inland waters and developing more effective ecological systems for better waste management. The arrangement of green areas within villages and environmental measures to integrate the village (or rural towns) into the landscape are also necessary.
- The social/cultural aims call for the renovation or building of wayside shrines, historical monuments and chapels to enhance cultural preservation. Also, the preservation or reproduction of gardens and open spaces of importance about conservation in a cultural or historical sense are necessary steps.

Although described differently by different rural development experts or scholars, carrying out the above measures constitutes the main ideas behind the concept and practice of rural revitalisation. The concept of *rural revitalisation* is a mnemonic that evokes overwhelming attention or urgency for rural development action. This is popularly referred to as *village renewal* in Germany and Austria, “where it is normally used as a tool for strengthening the capacities of rural communities” (Chigbu, 2012: p. 211). The concept was later adopted by the European Union (EU) member countries (see Magel, 1996; 2000; 2002). This process happens in all other places, albeit in diverse ways, methods, and under different social or scientific conditions. It is known as rural revitalisation or regeneration processes in North America, village renewal in Europe, village development in Africa, or other names in other parts of the world. However, rural revitalisation (renewal or regeneration) is different from urban revitalisation (or development or renewal or regeneration). Rural revitalisation is about the rural and not the urban.

Rural revitalisation should matter in the broader development agenda because it is a solution to rural decline. The rural decline is a condition seen in the outflow of people from rural areas to cities, resulting in population reduction, de-industrialisation and economic recession in rural areas (Markey et al., 2008). This scenario can be found around the world. However, China presents typical cases where rural revitalisation is most needed. Various regions of China have the relocation of peasants by the local governments in the hope of building new countryside (Liu et al., 2018). “China is one of the countries with the worst rural decline in the world (over the past 30 years), influenced by the dual structure of urban and rural areas and the development concept of emphasising cities over townships and industry over agriculture in China, large-scale rural population outmigration to cities in rapid urbanisation has resulted in hollowing out of villages, population ageing, inefficient utilisation of land resources or even emptying, depressed industries and declining rural areas” (Zhou et al., 2020: p. 4). The general decline of rural areas leads to the abandonment of rural homesteads and the decline of critical factors that enable the rural geography to function as a human settlement – including economy, culture, ecology,

industry, market, society, heritage, leisure, health and education. The object of rural revitalisation, where it is applied, is usually to restore and make these rural development elements more functional so that people's living conditions can improve alongside their environments.

3. THE URBAN-RURAL LAND LINKAGES AS A CONDITION THAT NEEDS STRENGTHENING

“There has been a dichotomous relationship between rural and urban areas” (Chigbu, 2013: p. 18). This is because “different agencies, procedures and remits for the management of rural and urban space were created” (Scott et al., 2007: p. 5). These drew a dividing line between urban and rural areas as if they have no linkages, interrelationships, or interdependences (Chigbu, 2013).

Urban and rural areas within national, regional and local spaces are intricately linked through various linkages (Chigbu, 2021). These linkages, as earlier outlined, manifest in economic, cultural, ecological, industrial, market, societal, heritage, leisure, health and educational relationships. However, “the increasing pace of development transformations with discrete planning of urban and rural areas has raised serious concerns for achieving coordinated development at the regional level” (Thapa et al., 2020: p. 1). In this regard, the concept of urban-rural linkages (URLs) was introduced to enhance the urban-rural interaction to bridge aspects of their potential linkages (Sher et al., 2020; Contin et al., 2022). Emanating from the URLs is the concept of the urban-rural land linkages (URLLs), which the Global Land Tool Network recently introduced through Chigbu's (2021) publication entitled, *Urban-rural land linkages: A concept and framework for action*, published by the UN-Habitat. The basic idea behind the concept of URLLs is to localise the interchanges of land resources between urban and rural areas to enable less parasitic developmental relationships—which have never been in favour of rural areas—between urban and rural areas.

The current disparity levels between the urban and rural areas have rendered them “socioeconomically divided into thriving urban areas, semi-thriving peri-urban areas and declining rural areas” (Chigbu's, 2021: p. vii). Irrespective of what part of the world one views it—of course, this situation is worse in certain parts of the world than in others—this narrative of two or three worlds that fundamentally develop unequally appears to be a reality. The URLLs represent a condition allowing urban and rural areas to co-exist for mutual developmental benefits. It is also justified by its representation of various developmental agendas related to land. These include agendas that address the environment, or conditions, for development. These are what make urban-rural land linkages a condition that needs strengthening. The big question is *how*.

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4. HOW RURAL REVITALISATION CAN STRENGTHEN RURAL-URBAN LAND LINKAGES

“Due to globalisation and urbanisation, the abandonment of rural villages is prevalent amongst developed and rapidly developing regions” (Chu et al., 2022: p. 9). This scenario, which manifests in the form of rural depopulation, “leads to the collapse of dynamic interdependent relationships between human activities and the natural environment, resulting in environmental degradation and the loss of cultural assets” (Li et al., 2019; Chu et al., 2022: p. 10). Based on the understanding that rural revitalisation and URLLs are already provided, this paper argues that opportunities exist for the revitalisation of rural areas (i.e., rural revitalisation) to serve as a measure for providing the URLLs conditions within countries and regions. Figures 1 and 2 have been used to illustrate how rural revitalisation can strengthen URLLs.

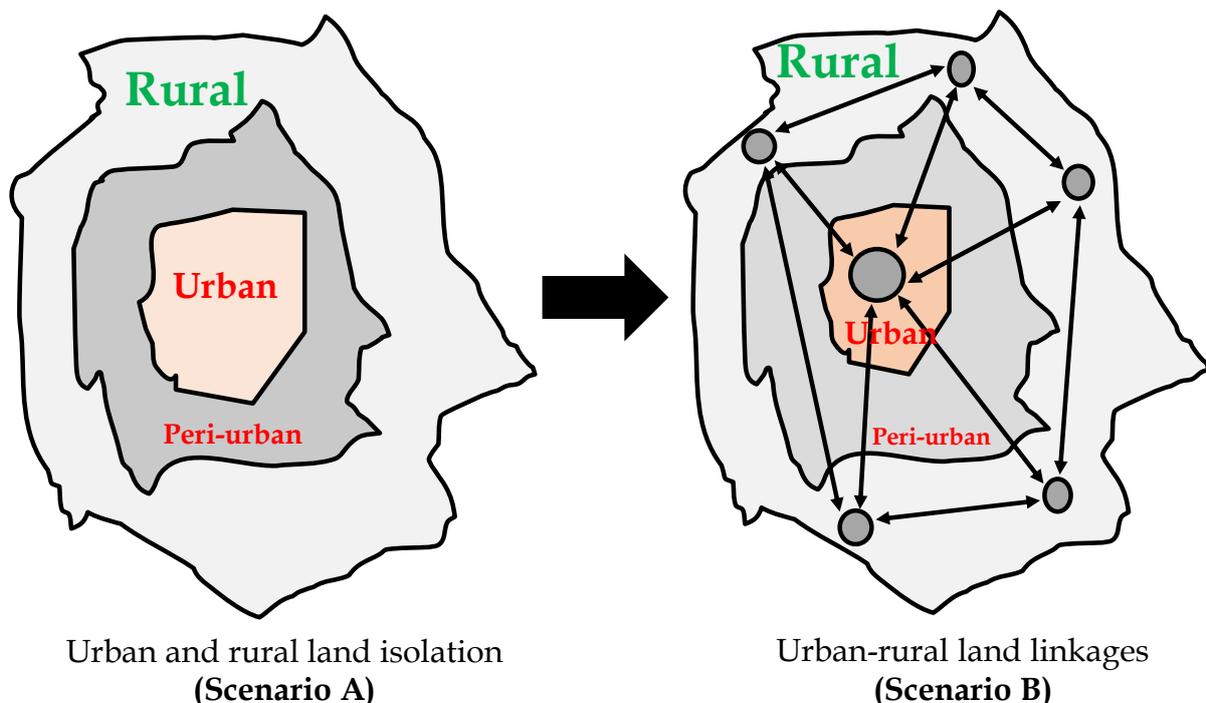


Figure 1: A shifting from the urban-rural divide to URLLs (adapted from Chigbu, 2021: p. 19)

In the first place, Chigbu’s (2021) “illustration of a shift from a focus on the urban-rural divide to one that promotes urban-rural connections” is used to show a scenario of rural-urban linkages (that is, **scenario B**). **Scenario A** indicates the urban-rural divide, the scenario in many countries. In this case, the linkages in scenario B (represented by double-edged arrows) emphasise interdependent land use and spatial functions that encourage rural-urban relations. These land linkages can manifest in cross-border or cross-sector land policies, planning decisions, land administration and land governance. In more concrete terms, land visions can be mainstreamed in fisheries, forestry, water access and transportation. The linkages can also reflect cross-jurisdiction, land knowledge exchange, and co-implementation of land rights protection as a common good in urban and rural areas. In whatever way it manifests or is made

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to manifest in geography, it is vital to ensure that they function as a continuum of interactions that work for the mutual interests of urban-rural.

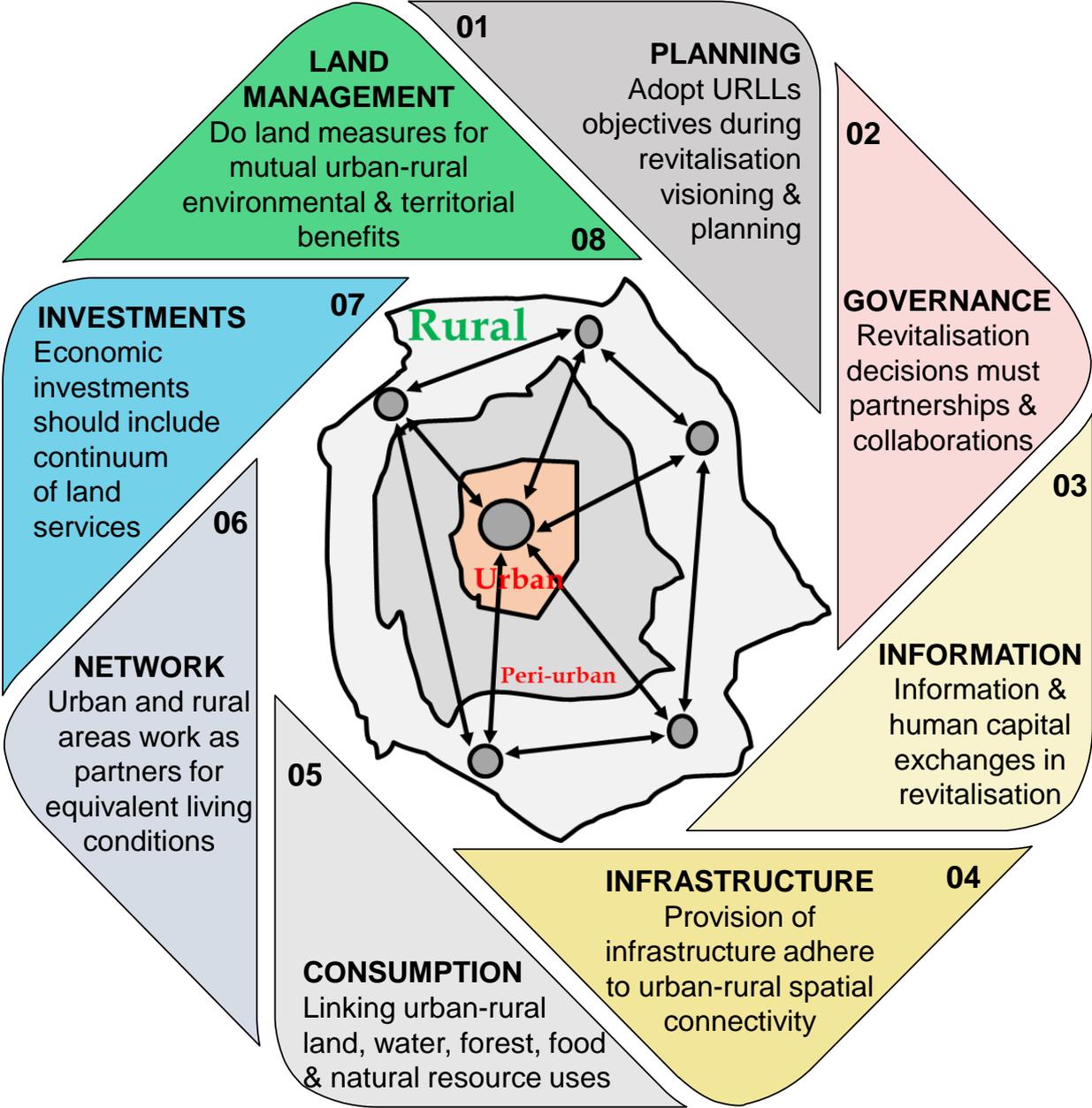


Figure 2: How a rural revitalisation can strengthen URLLs

Concerning how these land linkages can be facilitated and managed, please read the UN-Habitat and Global Land Tool Network’s seminal publication or report, *Urban-rural land linkages: A concept and framework for action*, by Chigbu (2021). With rural revitalisation, extensive work has been done in this area. To understand the generic process of rural revitalisation and its

associated issues, please refer to Wilson (1998), Liu (2001), Magel and Wehrmann (2006), Magel & Franke (2008), Chigbu (2012), Pradhan et al. (2021) and Chen et al. (2022). As the concern of this paper is primarily on how rural revitalisation can strengthen URLLs, Figure 2 illustrates measures to be taken in **scenario B**.

Figure 2 shows eight significant aspects of rural revitalisation that can strengthen existing URLLs systems wherever they exist. They can also enable the manifestation of URLLs where they do not already exist (although some form of URLLs does exist in most urban-rural spaces). These eighth revitalisation aspects are explained below.

- **Planning:** At the early stage of revitalisation, planning can integrate URLLs goals/objectives into the mainstream of the revitalisation process. This will enable the environment to integrate decisions for identifying and strengthening elements of URLLs.
- **Governance:** This involves making and implementing decisions and activities imposed by institutions, administrative authorities, politics, policies, development and planning. Governance interactions, partnerships and interdependences (e.g., making cross-jurisdiction land policies and land/spatial planning) must be controlled to ensure that urban and rural areas benefit from them equally. Rural living is more rooted in traditional values and institutions than urban areas. Governance of revitalisation processes can help connect people in urban and rural areas to rural cultures and share values in using land resources.
- **Information:** Information infrastructure must be linked to human capital exchanges (e.g., land information system and land-use planning for spatial connectivity, Investments and economic transactional mobility and accessibility) between urban and rural areas. This is crucial for collaborative planning. Land management, investments, networking and governance.
- **Infrastructure:** Infrastructure, such as transport, must be designed and implemented to support easy mobility, accessibility, economic distribution and marketing within and across urban and rural borders. This requires efficient land development and administration to support infrastructural development.
- **Consumption:** Better coordinated land (natural) resource consumption is crucial for achieving mutual urban and rural benefits in development. This requires more connectivity between urban and rural land consumption. For instance, land use, water use, forest use, food systems and other natural resource uses should be coordinated for sustainable use that benefits urban and rural areas.
- **Network:** The creation of spatial interactions between settlements and sub-settlements in urban and rural areas (and across urban and rural areas) will lead to the formation of functional spaces for land-based improvements in the living conditions of people in all settlements.

- **Investment:** Economic transactional mobility and accessibility and general exchanges (e.g., land administration for the continuum of services provisions and development of land markets) are crucial for ensuring that urban and rural areas tap into each other's land markets.
- **Land management:** It is crucial to manage the land and linkages and manage and administer environmental goods and amenities for mutual benefits (e.g., land management to avoid ecological risks) in rural and urban areas.

Rural revitalisation is crucial for strengthening URLLs because it presents a starting point for improving land administration and management in urban-rural continuum development. Hence, these eight aspects of revitalisation mentioned above can foster improved URLLs.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Urban-rural land linkages are all about connecting the urban and rural areas in ways that enable them to tap into each other's development and strengthens and support each other's developmental weakness. "Rural decline is an inevitable process as human society transforms from the agrarian to the urban-industrial economy, and further on to the knowledge economy" (Li et al., 2019: p. 135). Land revitalisation involves the renewal or invigoration of rural activities to be functional in ways that improve the living conditions of people (Chigbu, 2012). This paper has provided a cursory look into how the process of rural revitalisation can best strengthen urban-rural land connectivity. In doing this, the paper presented eight aspects of rural revitalisation that can improve rural communities' resilience by aligning their internal components' function and structure to support and tap from urban internal systems. The idea is for all these interactions to engender land-based processes of rural livelihood diversification, strong socioeconomic capital and the creation of land-based market-oriented institutions capable of sustaining rural areas. However, none of these can be achieved without some policy implications.

New policy positions will be necessary. First, for rural revitalisation to function and, second, for URLLs to respond to rural revitalisation measures. Planning changes may be needed to revision rural areas to rural revitalisation measures and URLLs conditions. In addition, cooperation and innovation will be crucial for successful rural revitalisation for URLLs improvements. In doing these, some challenges may be encountered. These could include ways of protecting rural values and managing rural villages against urbanisation (with positive social and economic consequences) without rural areas losing their identities in the entire process. Achieving these would depend on the available resources (e.g., funding) and human capacity. And most importantly, the political will to make urban-rural continuum policies and implement them. Irrespective of the situation any practitioner, government or community may find themselves in, the ideas presented in this paper can provide a general guide for boosting URLLs through rural revitalisation.

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