

Extended abstract

*Proximity: Keys to External Interactions
and Internal Dynamics of Rural Areas.
Theoretical-Methodological Proposal
and the Valencian Case*



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Highlights:

1. A new rural-urban identity associated with increasing mobility is being shaped and nurtured.
2. Generating specific resources in rural areas is vital to stimulate their endogenous development.
3. The development of specific resources in rural areas requires an organised proximity to urban areas.
4. Specific connections with each type of cluster condition the development of rural areas.
5. The labour and residential mobility of the rural population could be a territorial opportunity.

Abstract: The socio-economic dynamism of rural areas depends as much on their internal resources and potential as on their external interactions. On this basis, the article aims to explain how external interactions (with different types of clusters) in rural areas can contribute to improving the internal dynamism of rural areas. To achieve this goal, a theoretical framework based on the notions of proximity and mobility is outlined, and literature on rural-urban relations too, which is used as a guide to study the external interactions of several rural areas in the Valencian Country. The empirical research combines statistical information to define local labour markets, with longitudinal qualitative information based on in-depth interviews with different actors to interpret these results. It is concluded that external contribution is effectively produced when there is the generation of forms of organised proximity between rural and urban areas that allow the generation of specific resources in rural areas, a fundamental element to generate symmetrical relations between rural and urban areas. And this external contribution is different depending on the type of cluster with which rural areas interact.

Keywords: Rural-urban mobility, geographical proximity, organised proximity, specific resources, Valencian cases.

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Extended Abstract

1. Introduction and justification

The increasing breadth and complexity of rural-urban relations has led to the progressive overcoming of a rural-urban dichotomous conception in favour of a joint consideration of rural and urban areas (Laurin et al., 2020), recognising the great rural-urban interdependencies (Woods, 2009) and even the generation of shared rural-urban identities (Woods and Heley, 2017). This view has been reinforced by the Covid-19 pandemic and the consequent acceleration of multi-residency processes and reorganisation of living and working space (Pikner et al., 2023).

Within the field of these external relations, the importance of clusters and productive agglomerations in regional development and their impact on rural areas is recognised; even suggesting the consideration of rural areas as a specific type of cluster (Murdoch, 2009). In addition, some works try to address the critical factors for rural areas to take advantage of their interaction with urban areas (Bosworth and Venhorst, 2018).

However, while this literature on rural-urban relations recognises the diversity of external knowledge (Esparcia, 2014), it lacks a greater concern for the productive system. And, in particular, on the relationship between the interaction of productive activities in rural areas (and their type of development), on the one hand, and the nature of the development model of the urban areas with which these rural areas interact, on the other hand.

2. Objectives, methodology and sources, areas of study

The article aims to contribute to the literature on rural-urban relations by specifying the type of stimuli that rural areas can receive from different productive agglomerations. It seeks to answer this question: what process allows rural areas to take advantage of their external interaction to stimulate their endogenous development potential?

A theoretical framework is outlined, which combines the new mobility paradigm (Sheller and Urry, 2006; Bissell, 2013; Peacock and Pemberton, 2019) with the French proximity approach (Torre and Rallet, 2005; Torre and Gallaud, 2022) and with the literature on rural-urban relations (Murdoch, 2006; Woods, 2009, 2021; Bosworth and Venhorst, 2018; Laurin et al., 2020). In this framework the degree of mobility complexity is central to the type of proximity that is dominant in rural-urban relations. It is argued that rural-urban relations are better represented by the loop than by the relationship between two points, so that proximity has an increasingly multidimensional and cross-cutting character (Sheller and Urry, 2006; Bissell, 2013; Peacock and Pemberton, 2019). In this framework, if rural areas require the use of capital (human, creative, entrepreneurial) in interaction with urban areas (Bosworth and Venhorst, 2018), this use depends in part on the type of agglomerations (metropolitan areas, old industrial areas or SME systems) with which rural areas interact. But in all cases, this harnessing depends on the development of specific resources in rural areas, which allows for the stimulation and revitalisation of endogenous development potential.

From the perspective of methodology and empirical sources of information, we have analysed the local labour markets that define three territorial groupings in the inland area of the Valencian Country. From north to south, the first grouping comprises the regions of l'Alcalatén, the Alto Mijares and the Alto Palancia. The second includes the Serranía and the Rincón de Ademuz. And the third is composed of the Plana de Utiel-Requena and the Valle de Cofrentes-Ayora. In general, the three groupings define a relatively intermediate space (between the coast and inland). The density of internal and external relations has been studied in these territories, both based on home to work commuting and residential variations. In addition, this methodology, which is based on the processing of the main statistical information available, has been completed with a longitudinal analysis through in-depth interviews in the groupings considered, carried out at various points in time, to delve deeper into the intricacies and the dynamics of the rural-urban articulation of each territory.

3. Results

In general, the regions of the different territorial groupings show a high level of labour self-sufficiency, weak internal relationships within each territorial grouping and strong external relations with other types of urban clusters.

The improvement of roads, the expansion or relocation of certain companies to these inland regions, and the daily commute to work and the multi-residence situations between the coast and the inland, define a set of vectors that have favoured the interaction of the regions of l'Alcalatén and the Alto Mijares, especially the former, with the ceramics cluster. The existence of ceramic know-how in these inland regions has also been important. The link with the urban area of Castelló de la Plana, which has other more diverse activities, also stands out.

The above factors have also led to the integration of Alto Palancia with Plana Baixa, Camp de Morvedre and València and its metropolitan area, which involves interaction with different types of clusters. For example, in the relationship with the Camp de Morvedre (an old industrial area), the transfer of organisational know-how and the intensification of business cooperation between the two regions stand out. All this improves the possibilities of the Alto Palancia production system.

In the regions of Serranía and Rincón de Ademuz, improving accessibility, accompanied by growing population movements, has facilitated the interaction of both regions with the metropolitan area of Valencia. This has favoured in the Serranía the development of local tourism and leisure initiatives which have derived from the use of endogenous resources. However, this region also suffers a predatory action due to extractive mining.

In the Utiel-Requena region, interaction with the metropolitan area of València has contributed to the modernisation of its wine agri-food system and to the formation of more complex innovation networks between these two areas. On the other hand, in the Valle de Ayora region, an exogenous industrial development model seems to have hampered the exploitation of the endogenous resources of this territory.

4. Discussion

Bosworth and Venhorst (2018) show that the mobility associated with commuting and residential mobility tends to increase the costs of housing and living in rural areas, despite the existence of lower relative wages in rural areas. Rebalancing these relationships would require that some of the human, financial and social capital of high-income residents working outside would filter into rural areas, generating entrepreneurial opportunities for rural areas (Bosworth and Venhorst, 2018). The article provides evidence that what determines the ability of rural areas to establish symmetrical and profitable relationships with urban areas is their eventual capacity to

develop specific resources, which involves developing an organised relational proximity between the two types of areas.

5. Conclusions

The article contributes to understanding how the relations between rural and urban areas are becoming increasingly complex, defining new hybrid identities. The article suggests that this complexity has distinctive characteristics depending both on the development model and the nature of the productive system in rural areas, on the one hand, and on the type of urban cluster with which these areas interact, on the other. The interaction between both types of territories generates obstacles/opportunities for the endogenous development of rural areas.

The article shows that geographical proximity is not enough for the contact of a rural area with another type of cluster to generate an effective stimulus to the development of that rural area. Indeed, a certain degree of organised proximity or relational density (cognitive, organisational, etc.) between rural and urban areas is necessary.

6. Next steps

The main field of research little explored to date, and the main field that the authors will continue to study, is the relationship between the productive systems of rural areas and the productive systems of the different urban agglomerations. It is of particular interest to investigate how the specific dynamics of the different urban agglomerations can condition the productive-territorial dynamics of rural areas. Extending this research to other regions for comparative analysis is a promising line of research for the future.