

Handbook on Rural-Urban Linkages in the Global South.

C. Tacoli, I. Agergaard, M.H. Andreassen, D. Brown (eds).

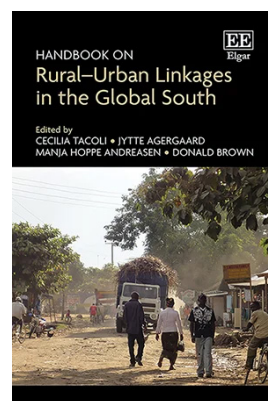
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The book under review offers a transcontinental perspective on the flows and interactions between rural and urban domains, with numerous examples drawn from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In this volume, the terms "rural" and "urban" are not presented as fixed or sharply defined categories, but rather in relational terms. The rural and the urban are conceived as interconnected spaces within a continuum of economic, social, political, and environmental linkages. In other words, the book adopts a relational and processual approach, rather than a statistical or administrative classification based on a dichotomous view. Tacoli's position is critical of administrative and political categorizations that portray rural and urban as discrete categories through censuses and public policies. The book argues that such divisions are arbitrary and of limited value for understanding the real dynamics of the Global South, where the flows of people, goods, money, and information constantly cross these boundaries.

The handbook also illustrates how countries in the Global South use very different definitions of what is considered rural or urban—based on population size,

density, administrative functions, or types of employment. However, the various contributors agree that these definitions fail to capture the complexity of contemporary territorial processes. The Handbook proposes understanding rural and urban within a multiscalar territorial framework, in which local processes are linked to national and global dynamics—such as migration, supply chains, or environmental policies. In short, "rural" and "urban" in this book are not closed spaces but dynamic positions within networks of interdependence. What is essential is to study the connections and transformations between them, rather than the boundaries that separate them.

It may be useful for the reader to recall the genealogy of the term "Global South". The concept emerged in the 1990s as an alternative to the term "Third World," originally coined by Alfred Sauvy (1952). In the following decades, authors such as Frantz Fanon, Samir Amin, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Andre Gunder Frank contributed to developing a critical view of the world system, which later influenced the notion of the Global South. Parallel to World-System Theory, Dependency Theory also evolved, proposing that underdevelopment is not a prelude to development but rather a structural condition resulting from the dependent integration of peripheral countries into the global economy (Cardoso and Faletto, 1969; Dos Santos, 1970; Gunder Frank, 1967; Amin, 1973).

In the late 1970s, a commission chaired by former German Chancellor Willy Brandt introduced the North–South categorisation, mapping global inequalities in spatial rather than ideological terms. From then on, classifications such as "non-aligned countries" or "Third World" were gradually replaced by the more general term "countries of the South" (Brandt, 1980). From the 1990s onwards, with globalisation and the decline of Cold War categories, the term "Global South" began to be used in academic and policy contexts to emphasise global interdependencies and postcolonial asymmetries (Escobar, 1995; Chakrabarty, 2000; De Sousa, 2009, 2014; Mahler, 2017).

The book is organised into five sections and twenty-one chapters, preceded by a dense and stimulating introduction by the editors. The first section focuses on the critical analysis of the sources documenting urbanisation processes. The second, drawing mainly on evidence from various African countries, examines the simultaneous and interconnected processes of rural settlement transformation and the emergence of new urban centres, most of which are small in demographic size but perform urban functions such as service provision and market intermediation. The

third part brings together essays showing how this dual process of de-ruralisation and urbanisation is driven by mobility—of people, goods, and ideas—and by the migration (permanent, temporary, or circular) of younger and more skilled sectors of the population to these emerging urban centres. The fourth section analyses the interface connecting both systems, where peri-urban areas become zones of urban expansion, transforming former rural landscapes into spaces for real estate speculation. Finally, the fifth section focuses on governance challenges arising in these new interstitial settlements, which constitute the main locus of occupational, residential, and economic transformation.

Above all, the introduction of the volume takes an early stand against the prevailing trend of applying universally pre-established schemes of rural–urban linkages and urbanisation processes, largely derived from European experiences of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Tacoli and colleagues argue that, rather than a linear relationship, rural–urban linkages are best understood as a complex and evolving network of connections across a specific space that can be described as “local,” yet is increasingly influenced by translocal links reflecting what happens elsewhere, often at considerable distance. The interconnections between rural and urban areas are fundamental to structural transformation—the transition from predominantly agrarian economies, where most of the population works in agriculture, to economies concentrated in manufacturing and services. This structural transformation often entails migration from rural to urban areas, where non-agricultural jobs are concentrated, and is therefore closely tied to urbanisation.

For greater clarity in my assessment of the Handbook’s contributions, I have organised them into six sections that summarise the main debates and help to appreciate the outstanding contributions of this collective work.

Urbanization and economic development

The editors of the book address the relationship between urbanisation and economic development. Drawing once again from the Western experience (Europe and North America), it might seem inevitable that urbanisation and development go hand in hand. The authors distance themselves from this perspective, arguing that the major Western urbanisation processes were heavily influenced by the colonial structures that shaped the world economy at the time. The evidence presented in the

essays that make up the book shows that this positive correlation between urbanisation and development does not hold in the urban transitions of Global South countries. B. Li (Chapter 4), for instance, shows that in China, urban growth and economic development have indeed gone together. However, although the country's rapid urbanisation has been essential to its economic growth by providing cheap labour for industrial expansion, it has come at the cost of systematic social and material exclusion of new urban dwellers, confined to suburban peripheries.

Urban centre definition

A crucial methodological issue concerns how to define what constitutes an urban centre, given the wide variety of criteria used internationally—from Japan's threshold of 50,000 inhabitants to Iceland's 200. In addition to population size, other criteria are also used, such as the density of built-up areas or the proportion of residents employed outside agriculture. Chapter 5 (Roy, Zérah and Denis) describes the economic structure and living conditions in India's smaller urban centres, where a large share of the population lives. They use the concept of "subaltern urbanisation," defined as a network system in which the base of the urban hierarchy—the smaller towns—gains greater visibility. India is a particularly interesting case, as "city" status is granted by provincial governments based solely on administrative designation. At the same time, national censuses employ the category of "census towns," defined according to demographic, socio-economic, and spatial criteria that differ from those applied to official cities.

Clearly, having coherent definitions of what is meant by an urban settlement would help in understanding urbanisation dynamics and developing policies. Among recent attempts to standardise definitions is the Degree of Urbanisation (DEGURBA) methodology, endorsed by the United Nations Statistical Commission, which uses geospatial population data and classifies settlements according to population density (Dijkstra et al., 2021).

Fadda and Heinrigs (Chapter 3) express similar concerns about the enormous diversity of definitions between countries and even over time, which poses major obstacles to international comparison and policy design. In Africa, small towns account for most urban settlements, and improving their measurement is essential for appropriate urban policy and resource allocation. However, collecting demographic

and economic data often exceeds the financial and technical capacities of national and local administrations. Their chapter describes the Africapolis database, which combines census data, satellite imagery, and other cartographic sources to generate internationally comparable data. Africapolis defines an urban agglomeration as a continuous built-up area with less than 200 metres between buildings and a minimum of 10,000 inhabitants. The results highlight the statistical significance of small towns of under 100,000 inhabitants, which represent more than 90% of all urban centres in the region. In many cases, these emerging towns result from in situ urbanisation, meaning they "graduate" from being large villages to small towns through natural population growth rather than rural–urban migration (Menashe-Oren and Bocquier, 2021).

D. Potts (Chapter 2) acknowledges the important contribution of the Africapolis database but argues that measuring urbanisation based solely on density can be misleading, as it inevitably overlooks local physical and socio-economic contexts. This leads to many large, compact villages—where agriculture remains the main activity—being classified as urban. Urbanisation is a complex process involving social and economic change, and a more detailed definition of "urban" (considering functions, economic structure, and employment sectors) is less likely to produce controversial or distorted data.

Land value

Land value changes rapidly during regional transitions from rural to urban-centred economies. Anderson (Chapter 6), after a longitudinal study of 55 villages in six African countries, describes how the opening of land markets to private investors has led to growing polarisation between farmers in remote areas and those with access to urban food markets. The latter have benefited more, attracting investment from medium-scale farmers based in cities. As a result, land access has become increasingly unequal over time.

In Vietnam (Chapter 7, Gillen, Tuan and Rigg), the transformation of rural livelihoods is linked to the economic reforms launched in 1986, which triggered a period of unprecedented economic growth, urbanisation, and rural change. Rather than a linear transition from rural to urban, this dynamic is better described as an interrelation between the two worlds, where rural areas now display urban characteristics, while

megacities retain essential rural features. The authors conclude that, for now, Vietnam's urban transition differs markedly from that of the Global North. Instead of agricultural workers migrating to cities for industrial and service jobs, factories have relocated to rural areas. As local industrialisation advances, younger generations seek factory work while older ones maintain family rice farms, which remain central to community identity and relations.

This process bears similarities with that described by Roy, Zerah, and Denis (Chapter 5) in the Indian context. In both India and Vietnam, the assumption that economic growth goes hand in hand with agglomeration and rural–urban migration does not hold up to critical scrutiny. Rather, widespread mobility—more than migration per se—seems to better describe this key aspect of rural livelihoods.

Mobility

Mobility in its many forms (from permanent migration to short-term circular mobility and daily commuting) is a central feature of rural–urban linkages and has undergone substantial transformations in recent decades. As transport and communications improve, people move more frequently in search of opportunities elsewhere. In Vietnam (Chapter 7) and India (Chapter 5), mobility is spatially limited, as workers commute to factories relocated in rural and small-town areas. This largely depends on a diversified local economy that allows residents to combine agricultural and non-agricultural activities. In less diversified local economies with limited opportunities, long-distance migration becomes a better option. However, this does not necessarily mean permanent migration, as some policies discourage it, and many individuals wish to maintain ties with their rural homes for security.

The book highlights the growing importance of spatial connectivity and multidirectional linkages through the concept of translocality. This concept emphasises the significance of networked places and flows beyond human mobility—such as the circulation of ideas, knowledge, capital, and goods—in shaping livelihoods. Kuiper and Greiner (Chapter 8) show how translocality provides a useful conceptual framework for understanding the links between migrant labour in Kenya's global horticultural production and transformations in their home regions. Workers move temporarily, investing their savings in their rural places of origin, where they plan to return, rather than in destination cities. Family members manage land and livestock,

and children are cared for by relatives. This has important implications for rural transformation in remote areas, where the ability (or inability) to migrate can exacerbate social polarisation. Andersson (Chapter 6) makes a similar point for Sub-Saharan Africa, where the seasonal influx of urban migrants working in agriculture benefits wealthier households with larger farms but can burden poorer ones.

Rural-urban interface

Peri-urban areas are the immediate spatial interface between rural and urban systems—zones of transition where the use of natural and urban resources overlap and often come into conflict, with significant implications for urban planning, land markets, and environmental management. Chapter 19 (Brown and Manda) illustrates the disputes between local authorities and traditional chiefs in Mzuzu, Malawi, highlighting competing interests around land access, which has gained value in peri-urban contexts. Here, ambiguous governance arrangements and overlapping land tenure systems exacerbate environmental degradation and the marginalisation of poor and vulnerable groups.

Lambert (Chapter 16) describes the dynamics of land subdivision in the peri-urban areas of Lima, Peru. There, illegal land subdivision—tellingly referred to as land trafficking—drives unprecedented urban expansion on steep slopes considered high-risk zones, home to nearly a third of the city's population. In these geographically remote areas, largely beyond conventional planning and policy reach, residential settlement often precedes the installation of infrastructure and basic services, while local governance structures enable speculation on public, communal, and protected lands.

Peri-urban transformations must also be understood within the broader context of access to land and housing within urban centres and how these factors interact with mobility. Zhu and Liu (Chapter 11) show that migrants are drawn to manufacturing jobs in industrial parks located in Shanghai's peri-urban areas. By contrast, local residents work in agriculture and services but also supplement their income by renting rooms to migrants. Private renting and small-scale informal rental markets also provide extra income for homeowners in Dar es Salaam's peri-urban areas. Chapter 15 (Andreasen and Agergaard) adopts suburbanisation as a conceptual framework to examine the drivers and dynamics of urban expansion, focusing on the

gradual construction of residential housing by middle- and upper-income groups amid complex informal land transactions.

Food

Food is a fundamental element of rural–urban linkages. With urbanisation, the share of the global population not producing food continues to grow, as does the number of middle- and high-income consumers with changing dietary preferences, often associated with more energy-intensive production. While this can have negative impacts on land and water use, peri-urban and rural producers able to respond to higher-value food demand benefit from these opportunities. However, this is not always the case, reflecting the heterogeneous nature of the peri-urban interface. For instance, agriculture is not practised among residents of the suburban neighbourhoods of Dar es Salaam described by Andreasen and Agergaard (Chapter 15), as land there has become more valuable as urban real estate than as a productive asset. Research in other peri-urban areas of Dar es Salaam and Mwanza also suggests that farmers are being progressively displaced by the high costs of land regularisation, forcing them to sell their land and relocate.

Urban food demand also drives the growth of some small towns, although this varies depending on the nature of products and value chains. Mukwaya et al. (Chapter 22) describe how food demand in two secondary urban centres in Uganda extends far beyond city limits, encompassing distant rural areas. Yet this growing interdependence—further stressed by environmental crises—remains largely overlooked in urban and national policy frameworks.

In conclusion, the recognition that over the past four or five decades rural–urban transformations have occurred primarily in Global South contexts has spurred academic debate about the relevance and direction of theorising the urban (Randolph and Storper, 2022) and the rural (Gillen et al., 2022). By proposing the term ruralisation in contrast to urbanisation, Gillen et al. (2022) emphasise the importance of understanding how rural–urban linkages shape livelihoods and their ongoing interaction with rural life. By insisting that rural life persists through dynamics such as in situ ruralisation, extended ruralisation, and rural returns, they challenge the idea that urbanisation is a

global, inevitable, and all-encompassing process, as proposed by advocates of planetary urbanisation (Brenner and Schmid, 2015). These universalising conceptualisations are also resisted by a diverse group of urban scholars, influenced by postcolonial, feminist, and subaltern studies, who have applied a political and epistemological strategy of provincialising urban theory (Derickson, 2015). Others have taken a less radical stance, calling for a revitalisation of urban theory that recognises that some regions of the Global South are urbanising along specific historical and geographical trajectories (Randolph and Storper, 2022; Fox and Goodfellow, 2021). As Fox and Goodfellow (2021) argue, "it is not only the 'southernness' or postcoloniality of Southern cities that distinguishes them. It is also the fact that late urbanisation within the global urban transition brings particular challenges and opportunities."

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