

Urban-rural connections could boost resilience in the face of change

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Big cities have a lot to learn from communities that live simpler lifestyles based on livestock raising. Credit: David Mark via Pixabay

Head out of the city and escape to the countryside. Soon, the road narrows, the lights dim and the human settlements get further and further apart. You stop and listen. Silence. Urban sprawl is replaced by fields and farms. You could be in a different world.

Such neat depictions of the boundaries between town and country have existed through the ages, but they are changing. Scattered and dispersed [urban growth](#) has created large, part-urban, part-rural peri-urban (hinterland) areas. New technologies have enabled new trends, such as people who live in the countryside and work in the city.

If there are lessons for [public officials](#) in harnessing stronger rural-urban connections, there might also be applications in learning from pastoralist communities around the world. So said Ian Scoones, who for three decades has been leading research about what this group might teach us in terms of responding to uncertainties.

"Pastoralists are livestock keepers, small-scale sheep farmers, cattle herders—people who make use of highly variable rangelands, often through mobile practices," said Scoones, who is professor of environment and development at the Institute of Development Studies (U.K.) and coordinator of the [PASTRES project](#).

"These people are marginal in terms of economics, politics, and resources, but there are hundreds of millions of them and the rangelands they make use of have nearly half the world's land surface," he said. While there are few examples of pastoralists influencing policies, Scoones believes there is untapped potential.

Blurred boundaries

"Rural and [urban areas](#) are not that distinct nowadays," says Han Wiskerke, professor of rural sociology at the University of Wageningen in The Netherlands. "They intersect and interact. Urban areas expand to the suburbs and there's increased economic activity in greenbelt areas."

From 2017 to 2021, Wiskerke coordinated a pan-European project focused on unlocking synergies between rural, urban, and peri-urban

areas. A key focus was creating stronger relationships between neighboring rural-urban communities to help them envisage shared plans for sustainable growth.

ROBUST's Living Lab in Graz (Austria) helped increase public transport provision in peri-urban areas, driving down car use. The team achieved this by bringing together [local government officials](#), businesses and NGOs to analyze the effects of an enhanced regional transport system on citizens' behavior.

"These areas are increasingly interconnected in terms of populations and activities, yet there is often still a divide when it comes to how policies are determined," said Wiskerke. "We looked for common areas of interest, where communities were interdependent, and tried to identify ways they might better support each another."

Living labs

Through the project, ROBUST examined governance and decision-making processes in 11 city regions. Its "living labs" concept spanned Europe, from Lisbon to Ljubljana. Living labs were forums which brought together politicians, researchers, businesses, service providers and citizens to co-create a local action plan.

These were complemented by "communities of practice," organized around priority topics such as business models, public infrastructure, and ecosystem services. By bringing together individuals facing similar challenges across Europe, they could share information and experiences of implementing change.

Through the work of ROBUST's Living Lab in Ljubljana (Slovenia), a new sustainable meal program was offered in city schools, providing nutritious food sourced from local farms. Not only did this cut down

food miles and provide opportunities for local farmers, it also enabled food literacy and education opportunities for pupils.

And in Gloucestershire (U.K.), the Living Lab reduced the effects of flooding in the City of Gloucester by looking at nature-based environmental interventions in rural areas too.

"This project really highlighted how if we take care of our countryside, our countryside can take care of our cities," said Wiskerke.

Managing uncertainty

The PASTRES project under Ian Scoones led a global team investigating how pastoralists across six different sites in six countries—China, India, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tunisia and Italy—each deal with uncertainty. Scoones wants to know what broader implications this might have for responding to global challenges in non-pastoralist settings.

Scoones thinks we need to look to how pastoralists organize and respond in real-time in the face of uncertainties including environmental ones.

"This is what pastoralists do. If there's a drought they talk to people, they move, they adapt. They don't try to control the system," he said.

Responding to environmental uncertainties is only one area where Scoones believes we can learn from pastoralists. There could also be applications for rethinking insurance and social welfare systems, and in responding to health emergencies, like the COVID-19 pandemic.

He explained, "What we learnt from the pandemic is very similar to how pastoralists respond to uncertainty of a specific sort. The way the pandemic response happened most effectively was through people—informal networks who really helped to manage the uncertainty, responding, adapting, and dealing with challenges."

Through the PASTRES project his team of researchers—Ph.D. students, most of them originally from pastoral areas—lived within communities carrying out qualitative and [ethnographic research](#) to understand more about people's way of life, the challenges they faced and their decision-making in response.

An important element of the work was a "photo-voice" initiative—a research method which allowed pastoralists to record their own perspectives and reflect on their own settings. "We gave people cameras to document uncertainties in their lives, and they even shared images and ideas via WhatsApp," explained Scoones.

Seeing Pastoralism

These images and stories from pastoralists were shared via the website [Seeing Pastoralism](#) and an exhibition which has already been displayed in Kenya, Stockholm and as part of COP26 in Glasgow. Later this year it will reach Brussels and go on display at the European Commission.

Back to ROBUST and longer-term, Wiskerke now hopes that by highlighting examples where positive local actions have been achieved, seeds can be sown for more integrated policymaking between rural and urban areas elsewhere.

The final ROBUST "manifesto" report calls for much greater urban / rural collaboration across all policy areas. "Rural and urban areas are interdependent, and I hope this project facilitates much greater collaborative policymaking between them in the future," said Wiskerke.

"Tackling our shared challenges—from improving public services to responding to climate change—needs to be about this kind of inclusive development."

More information: ROBUST: cordis.europa.eu/project/id/727988

PASTRES: cordis.europa.eu/project/id/740342

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