
CONCEPTUALIZING RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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ABSTRACT: *The need to more accurately conceptualize the concept of rural development has increased during recent decades. This is largely the result of the absence of a universally accepted definition of rural development, the absence of universally accepted theories of rural development and the growing interest to theorize it, the persistent increase of rural poverty, and the growing need to formulate effective rural development policies that could address poverty in rural areas, but also because of the multifaceted ways in which rural development could be realized. Thus, the main objective of this paper is to offer a new definition or concept of rural development in the twenty-first century. To achieve this objective the study purely used secondary data. Thus, both theoretical and empirical literature deemed necessary to better understand the concept of rural development was rigorously reviewed. The review result shows that there is no universally accepted definition of rural development. As a result, the concept of rural development is widely recognized in the literature as a disputed notion both in practice, policy, and theory. Thus, this study approaches the task of conceptualizing rural development by providing a conceptual definition that serves both academics and practitioners. Moreover, the study also proposed different mechanisms through which rural development can be realized. Generally, the study concludes that emphasizing the need to supplement the theory behind the new rural development hypothesis with new definitions that help us to more precisely understand what is meant by rural development, this study offers a new definition of rural development as a necessary step in that direction.*

KEYWORDS: concept, rural, rural development, theories of rural development, poverty

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to discuss how the concept of rural development could be conceptualized in the twenty-first century. In the recent past, rural development has emerged in world politics. However, there is no universally accepted definition of rural areas and rural development so far. In this regard, it is widely recognized in the literature that rural development is a disputed notion both in practice, policy, and theory. There is no universally accepted definition of 'rural areas'. The concept of rural areas varies from country to country and also the definition may also vary from time to time in the same country. This is because different countries use different criteria to identify the rural area from urban areas. However, in many countries of the world, the areas commonly labeled as 'rural' share several common features that can distinguish them from urban areas include occupation, population size, population density, labor market or settlement context, etc (Adisa, 2014, www.soas.ac.uk, Nd, Ekong, 2010).

Over past decades many measures have been taken to address poverty across the world and much notable progress has been achieved in poverty reduction in most developing countries except in the SSAs. However, it remained high in rural areas of most developing countries. According to (Global Food Policy Report (GFPR)., 2019)) a majority of the world's poor live in rural areas: rural populations account for 45.3 percent of the world's total population, but 70 percent of the world's extremely poor. The global poverty rate in rural areas is currently 17 percent, more than double the urban poverty rate of 7 percent. It is generally accepted that the Conditions for them are worse than for their urban counterparts when measured by almost any development indicator, from extreme poverty to child mortality and access to electricity and sanitation (Food and Agricultural Organization of United Nations (FAO), 2020).

For instance, rural areas remain underserved compared to urban areas and face a wide array of challenges across the globe: rural areas struggle with the environmental crisis in China; the severe agrarian crisis in India, and acute shortage of jobs for the growing youth populations in Africa. And the gulf is widening, contributing to large-scale migration to urban areas. This situation exists despite half a century of rural development theories and approaches, and despite the global momentum built around the Millennium Development Goals between 2000 and 2015. Without greater progress in rural development, it is unlikely that the new Sustainable Development Goals will be met. It is thus expedient for rural development issues, policy and practices to take priority position in intellectual discourse among researchers and other stakeholders (Adisa, 2014).

The purpose of this paper is to conceptualize the concept of rural development in the twenty-first century. It was organized into three major sections. The first section discusses the 'rural' concept. The second presents the concepts of rural development. Finally, suggestions are offered on how rural development can be conceptualized in the 21st first century and how to enhance the rural development process in developing countries.

Rural Development

The first section of this paper presents how different scholars and institutions define and conceptualize 'rural areas'.

The concepts of rural areas

The definition of "rural" differs by country, though it is usually used in contrast to "urban". In other words, the term rural area does not have a universally accepted definition. As result, the definition of the rural area varies from country to country and even it also varies within the same country over time. In this regard, it argued that researchers, policy officials, and different institutions employ many definitions to differentiate rural from urban areas, which often leads to unnecessary confusion and unwanted mismatches in program eligibility (United States Department of Agricultural (USDA., 2019). Thus, the existence of multiple rural definitions reflects the reality that rural and urban are multidimensional concepts. Thus, the next paragraph presents how different scholars and institutions define and conceptualize rural areas.

According to Adisa (2014), the term 'rural' does not have a conventional definition and the term rural evades consensual definition to the extent that even within some countries, there are deferring

definitions of 'rural'. For instance, in Japan rural areas are classified based upon population size, showing an area other than "an area with over 5,000 people, which consists of each district with a population density of over 4,000 per square kilometer (JICA.GO.JP, Nd). In Nigeria, the 2006 Census classifies a rural area as having less than 20000 inhabitants (Adisa, 2014). In Canada, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development defines a "predominantly rural region" as having more than 50% of the population living in rural communities where a "rural community" has a population density of fewer than 150 people per square kilometer(Wikipedia).

In the USA also the definition of the Census urban/rural definition is modified from decennial Census to Census; the most recent definition for Census 2000 defines urbanized areas by the population density of interrelated geographic units and adds a new designation of "urban clusters," which have a smaller total population than urbanized areas (2,500–49,999 versus $\geq 50,000$, respectively). For both the 1990 and the 2000 definition, rurality is defined by exclusion (all areas not urban are rural) and for certain Census data products is additionally subdivided into the rural farm and rural non-farm, with the farm being those households who sold at least \$1000 in agricultural products and rural non-farm all else U.S. Bureau of Census (2000) as cited as in (Susan, et al, 2006 and Health Resource and Service Administration (HRSA), 2020). As shown above, rural could be defined in varying contexts depending on where and what criteria are used in a particular state. This definition may not also apply in a uniform way to other countries.

Using some sociologically idealized models of differentiation, (Ekong, 2010) and, (www.soas.ac.uk, Nd) identified what was referred to as 'very general' differences in the rural-urban typology: Some of the features that indicated in the literature to define rural area include occupation; the area where a majority of the resident engaged in agriculture, size of the place; rural communities tend to be generally smaller in size of the area inhabited than urban communities, less social differentiation (there are generally fewer social classes in rural areas than urban areas), lower population density (Population density and composition: number of inhabitants per unit area of land in rural communities is always smaller than for urban centers, rural populations also tend to be less heterogeneous than urban populations.), less social and spatial mobility, and slow rate of social change.

The above-mentioned features adopted to identify rural and urban typology, are extremities in the rural-urban divide and do not exclusively typify any real-life communities (Ekong, 2010). In this regard, (Adisa, 2014) argued that definitely, all the listed items cannot be true for all rural areas around the world. However, they are mostly true for rural areas in developing countries. Ashley and Maxwell (2001) as cited as in (Adisa, 2014) defines 'rural' as constituting a 'space where human settlement and infrastructure occupy only small patches of the landscape, most of which is dominated by fields, pastures, woods, water, mountains, and deserts'; but conceded that the term 'rural' is ambiguous and echoed IFAD (2001) submission that 'national distinctions between rural and urban are arbitrary and varied'.

As indicated above, many definitions of "rural" are existing for national and provincial analysis in different countries of the world. Each definition discussed above emphasizes different criteria (population size, density, and context) and has different associated thresholds. In other words,

definitions of "rural" differ in terms of criteria, thresholds, and size of building blocks. These differences may have impacts on rural research; have implications for rural policy analysis, and inclusive development.

The Concepts of Rural Development

There is also no universally accepted definition of rural development. As result, different scholars and institutions define and conceptualize it in different ways. In supporting this, it is argued that the definition of rural development has advanced through time as a result of changes in the perceived mechanisms and goals of development (Anríquez and Stamoulis, 2007).

According to the World Bank (1975), rural development was seen as purely an economic issue or raising the low levels of rural income through agricultural modernization. This definition is reflective of rural development as a subset of development in the 1970s. This is because in the 1970s development was also viewed merely from the economic dimension. However, nowadays development is broadly viewed as an overall improvement of the quality of life of a human being in terms of economic, social, economic, political, environmental, and administrative issues. Thus, the 1975 World Bank definition does not consider other important dimensions of development listed above. In other words, before the 1970s, rural development was seen to be synonymous with agricultural development. In this regard, (Johnston, 1970) argued that in the 1960s and early 1970s, intense industrialization was the main characteristic of the perceived development path. In this context, he conceptualized rural development as precisely leading into that path: conceived rural development as basically a part of structural transformation characterized by diversification of the economy away from agriculture. This process is facilitated by rapid agricultural growth, at least initially, but leads ultimately to a significant decline in the share of agriculture to total employment and output and the proportion of the rural population to the total population.

Later in the 1980s World Bank defined rural development, as a strategy designed to improve the economic and social life of the rural poor, which has since been variously defined. Besides, later during the 1970s, rural development is conceptualized based on equity considerations, the focus and definition of rural development turned to the provision of social services to the rural poor. Subsequently, the 1970's rural development as a concept has been highly related to the promotion of standards of living and as a precondition for reducing rural poverty (Johnston, 1970).

More broadly than above mentioned World Bank definitions of rural development, Kata (1986) argued that rural development indicates the overall development of rural areas to improve the quality of life of the rural people. However, the author also fails to consider some important aspects/ dimensions of rural development that will be discussed later in this paper in detail.

Other scholars conceived rural development as a strategy to empower a specific group of people (particularly the marginalized group in rural areas like poor rural households, landless group of the community, and small scale farmers, to gain for themselves and their children more of what they want and need). In his words, it involves assisting the poorest among those who seek a livelihood in the rural areas to demand and control more of the benefits of rural development (Chambers, 1987). This is definition clearly shows rural development as a narrow strategy that is designed to

empower only the marginalized group of societies in rural areas. However, rural development may be conceptualized as a broader strategy intended to favor all groups of people. In other words, conceptually it could be conceptualized as one of the strategies that intended is to improve the livelihood of all groups of society in general.

Compare to some of the above-discussed definitions of rural development, (Madhu, 2000) broadly defines rural development as an activity concerned with the improvement of spatial and socio-economic environments of rural areas to enhance the ability of the individuals to cater to and sustain their well-being. In line with this definition, in very recent years rural development is conceived as the process of improving the opportunities and well-being of rural people. It is a process of change in the characteristics of rural societies. In addition to agricultural development, it involves human development and social and environmental objectives, as opposed to just economic ones. Therefore, rural development encompasses health, education, and other social services. It also uses a multi-sector approach for promoting agriculture, extracting minerals, tourism, recreation, and niche manufacturing ((IFAD), 2016).

In recent years, some scholars began to accept rural development as a subset of development. In this sense (Singh, 2009), argued that the term rural development connotes the overall development of rural areas, intending to improve the quality of life of rural people. According to him, rural development is a comprehensive and multidimensional concept, and encompasses the development of agriculture and allied activities; village and cottage industries; crafts, socio-economic infrastructure, community services, and facilities and, above all, the human resources in rural areas. Furthermore, he conceptualized the term rural development as a process, a phenomenon, a strategy, and a discipline. As a process, it implies the engagement of individuals, communities, and nations in pursuit of their cherished goals over time. As a phenomenon, it is the result of interactions between various physical, technological, economic, socio-cultural, and institutional factors. As a strategy, it is designed to improve the economic and social well-being of a specific group of people, that is, the rural poor. As a discipline, it is multidisciplinary, representing an intersection of agricultural, social, behavioral, engineering, and management sciences. This contemporary definition and concepts of rural development are recognized in the literature as, " the contemporary 'narratives', 'definitions' or 'prescriptions' concerning rural development characteristically tend to address everything that affects rural people and the quality of their life as entities and as integral members of the larger society and, indeed, the world" (Adisa, 2014).

As discussed above there is no consensus among scholars on the definition or how to conceptualize rural development. However, like the concept of development, the definition and concepts of rural development have been continuously modified, changed and its dimensions also broadened in line with the change in concepts of development. The review result also shows that the concept of rural development is multidimensional which can be viewed in different ways as concept, process, strategy, and field of studies. As indicated above in literature, for a long time some scholars and institutions narrowly conceptualized rural development as purely an economic issue or raising the low levels of rural income through agricultural modernization. Nevertheless, nowadays it has been broadly considered as a subset of development. For instance, it is broadly defined as the

development that benefits rural populations; where development is understood as the sustained improvement of the population's standards of living or welfare (Singh, 2009) and, (Anríquez, G. and Stamoulis, K., 2007).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

As discussed above there is no universally accepted definition and conception of a rural area and rural development. Thus, the concept of rural development continues to be a contested concept in practice, policy, and theory. This may have impacts on research activities in this regard, rural policy analysis, and theorizing rural development. All these issues show the importance of conceptualizing rural development in a proper way which this paper seeks to address.

As aforementioned above in the literature, most of the above-discussed definition and concept of rural development has its limitations in defining or conceptualizing rural development. Thus, the already established and discussed above definition or concepts of rural development may be broadly classified into three;

Firstly, in the 1960s and 1970s, rural development was primarily conceived as merely raising the income of rural people through the modernization of agriculture.

Secondly, rural development was broadly seen as the development that benefits rural populations. It is considered an improvement of the spatial and socio-economic environment of rural areas to enhance the ability of the individuals to cater to and sustain their well-being also have a conceptual gap.

Thirdly, those who consider rural development as a subset of development; where development is understood as the sustained improvement of the population's standards of living or welfare and define rural development as connotes overall development of rural areas, to improve the quality of life of rural people. In short, those who defined rural development as 'a process leading to sustainable improvement in the quality of life of rural people, especially the poor'.

Thus, the review result shows that rural development is a multidimensional concept which lacks a single universally accepted definition. My assumption in this regard is that some of the already established definitions of rural development and widely used definition or concepts of rural development used in the literature have some limitations that needed to revisit in defining and conceptualizing rural development. This is because the already existing definitions or concepts of rural development are reflective of the narrow concept of rural development. In other words, some scholars and institutions attempts to define or conceptualize rural development have failed to conceptualize rural development in a broader perspective or they fail to show how it could be theoretically as well as practices linked to the concept of development in general.

For instance, in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s concepts of rural development were gradually modified as it was discussed above in the literature. Very recently, some scholars and institutions broadly conceptualized as a subset of development. And broadly defined as the development that benefits rural populations; where development is understood as the sustained improvement of the

population's standards of living or welfare (Singh, 2009) and, (Anríquez, G. and Stamoulis, K., 2007). However, this widely considered as a broad concept of rural development in the literature have conceptual and practical gaps discussed hereunder as follows. For instance, if we assume rural development as a strategy designed to improve merely the overall qualities of rural people as assumed by many scholars and institutions. It is conceptually wrong because any strategies designed to improve the overall quality of life of rural people not only favor rural areas alone and it also favors urban people.

It is obvious that urban and rural economies are highly interdependent or may not be viewed separately. Thus, it is theoretically and conceptually wrong to assume that one particular strategy or intervention designed to improve the overall qualities of life of either rural or urban people as it only favors one of them. This is because both rural and urban economies are highly interdependent may not be viewed separately. Furthermore, if we also attempt to address the development challenges that either rural or urban people are facing, it is better to assume intervention in one area has a direct or indirect influence on others.

Thus, in this paper, rural development is broadly conceptualized as one of the strategies which are intended to make a permanent or overall improvement in the living conditions of all segments of the societies in general (primarily the living conditions of rural people and it also improve the living condition of urban people) sustainably. This could be achieved or realized through empowering the capacity of rural communities to improve their living conditions, integrating rural and urban economies, provision of different infrastructures that can improve their wellbeing, reducing their heavy reliance on natural resources for their livelihoods which harm the environment (by rural industrialization), minimizing the adverse effects that urban development poses on rural development through regulation, improving the institutional capacity of local institutions working on the issues of rural people, etc.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The provided definition of rural development allows the delimitation of the different elements and processes that exist in rural development. Such elements and processes, from a rural development approach, merge to produce goals that seek to improve a community's living conditions and quality of life both in rural and urban areas. Further, the offered conceptualization allows us to produce a typology that synthesizes the different forms and contexts in which rural development occurs in modern times. In this study, rural development is broadly viewed as a subset of development. Thus, it could be viewed mainly as a process and strategy. As a process, it could be conceived as the process of improving the opportunities and well-being of rural people, semi urban and urban people. As a strategy, it could be defined as one strategy designed to improve the economic and social well-being of all peoples in both rural and urban areas in a sustainable manner.

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