

# FOREWORD

## **Addressing the Rural Gap and Accessibility**

The European integration project has once again come to terms with the rural question. In the mid-1980s the transformation of the Common Agricultural Policy and the enacting of rural development policies meant a radical turn for rural territories. On the one hand, agricultural activities were incorporated into the global value chains. On the other hand, development policies allowed for the modernisation and improvements in the quality of rural life. However, this process of rural restructuring has not prevented the rural issue from reappearing three decades later on the agenda of social concerns under the reality of depopulation and demographic decline.

The politics of modernisation and rural development assume that the rural decline is rooted in economic backwardness and productive disconnection from the big markets. It was considered that the impetus for development would, by means of improvements in incomes, determine the improvement in living conditions. This argument failed to appreciate that the surge in European well-being during the second half of the twentieth century was brought about by a collective project that entrusted its success in state policies. This lack of understanding has contributed to the logic of redistribution and the process of social protection failing to take differences between territories and habitats into account.

The rural restructuring has meant changes in the productive organisation, by means of a wide diversification of activities and the extension of multifunctionality; however, it also has brought about an increase in mobility and daily commuting. The growth of the European economies has continued to follow the urban concentration model which is based on economies of scale. Rural–urban commuting has allowed the rural population to remain stable and permitted its connection with the urban job markets. The generalisation and intensification of rural mobility promote a territorial interconnection that diminishes the urban–rural frontiers (Champion, Coombes and Brown 2008).

This increase in rural mobility has several consequences. In the first place, it generates important social inequalities due to the different mobility capacities and resources that rural inhabitants have. Compared to highly mobile groups, such as middle-aged men and professionals, others remain immobilised, as women with family responsibilities and low-income immigrants are. In terms of accessibility to services and opportunities, these groups are progressively relegated to secondary positions. Furthermore, rural mobility is made up almost exclusively of private motoring. In areas of low density and high dispersion, privately owned cars constitute the main transportation option. The centrality that the automobile has acquired represents an important challenge in territorial planning and transport organisation. Furthermore, it increases the exclusion of certain groups, such as the elderly, those with reduced capacities to have a motorised daily life, and those who cannot afford the significant costs involved. As a result, mobility, which is crucial for the sustainability of rural areas, represents a new source of social exclusion.

European rural areas are located on the edges of economic growth and innovation because both processes are dependent on the concentration of capital, resources, labour, capacity to consume, and knowledge. Similarly, social policies have favoured the concentration in the provision of services according to demographic density criteria. The offer of healthcare, education, and cultural services have been developed without consideration for the spatial friction and the cost of mobility, thus reinforcing the urban–rural divide concerning social conditions. The difficulties to access services have determined a slow process of liveliness decline. For example, in Europe, as a whole fecundity has become concentrated in suburban areas (Kulu and Boye 2009), places where there is a better connection to educational opportunities and caring services cost less in terms of time and money. Young rural couples end up moving to optimise their residence place between labour supply and healthcare demand. The rural gap is principally producing the lack of accessibility to welfare, which may be considered as a form of exclusion from citizenship rights.

While Europe ages, the rural areas are over-ageing and they have lower birth rates along with persistent youth emigration. The ageing society has a very special incidence in rural territories whereby higher demand for related healthcare and assistance services combines with their being less accessible. This lack of accessibility is compensated for by the middle-aged population through increased mobility. Nevertheless, opportunities for mobility among the older citizens are reduced, and this state of dependence means added costs in terms of time, dedication, and money for the intermediate generations.

This complex challenge of rural accessibility is derived from the way the geographic problems, such as dispersion and distance, and social dimensions, such as ageing and the digital divide, combine. The geographic definitions of accessibility are distorted by demographic and social conditions. The rural social composition is changing and also determines how the challenges of accessibility and new demands of public policies define. The interrelationships between accessibility, mobility, and the urban–rural divide require new focuses that facilitate the understanding of how the different rural and social panoramas are configured; these may be residential, tourist, commuting districts, remote regions, and so forth (Camarero and Oliva 2019).

It is crucial to incorporate the new paradigms of digital, remote, and assisted accessibility in order to reduce social inequality, as well as including forms of shared mobility and on-demand transport systems. These must be understood as public commons, and not merely technological advances, and their socio-technical configuration must be incorporated into forms of governance (Oliva and Camarero 2019). Their potential makes the territory porous; favouring equitable accessibility to the opportunities and services will determine the welfare of the rural areas, their capacity to attract resources and residents and to avoid social decapitalisation, as well as reinforce rural resilience when facing changes.

Rural issues, such as health services, transport, agriculture, and tourism, are being addressed by several administrative departments, but policies inspired by urban visions are not able to adjust themselves to the complex reality of rurality (Sherry and Shortall 2019). This need for specialised attention has given an impetus to rural proofing [European Parliament Resolution 2018/2720 (RSP)]. Thus, the rural policies are evolving towards ways of thinking about planning that are different from the standardised policy recipes for a world that requires an effective hybridisation with urban and technological processes.

With the goal of advancing European rural–urban connectivity the book *Rural Accessibility in Non-Metropolitan Regions. Concepts, Methodologies and Policies*, edited by Elisabetta Vitale Brovarone, Giancarlo Cotella, and Luca Staricco, offers particularly relevant findings to understand the role of accessibility and mobility in rural sustainability. The powerful analysis based on scientific evidence from case studies developed in eight countries across Europe is highly valuable and a unique contribution to reflect on the perspectives and the analytical and conceptual issues that are required, as well as to policy design that considers the conversation between planning and local needs.

The decline of rural areas cannot be understood in terms of economic development, but rather in terms of accessibility. Definitively, it must be interpreted in terms of equality, social justice, and citizenship (Sheller 2018). The consideration of a just and egalitarian society in terms of mobility, as suggested by Cass, Shove and Urry (2005), is crucial when broaching the rural–urban divide. Comprehension of accessibility as a matter of citizenship is the starting point for removing the rural issue from the socioterritorial problems' agenda, as well as for advancing the construction of a socially sustainable Europe.

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