Regions in Transition II: Redefining urban-rural balance in changing times



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Editorial on redefining urban-rural balance in changing times

By Eduardo Oliveira, Stefania Fiorentino and Robert Bowen

The overarching theme for the three issues of Regions in 2021 is *Regions in Transition*. This second Issue of the year meets a world running at different paces. While most of Europe and North America, have eased their COVID-19 restrictions due to a growing share of vaccines inoculated among the population, several other world regions are still facing high levels of transmissibility. These differences raise concerns in terms of resource distribution, place-based leadership in terms of crisis management and spatial inequalities, mainly between

urbanized landscapes and rural territories.

In this Issue 10, the Editorial Team invited authors to contribute to redefining the urban-rural balance in this troubled time of a pandemic. We were particularly interested in articles on rural development and rural entrepreneurship as well as articles discussing topical issues of coastal and peripheral areas. We were also open to welcome articles debating economic, social, and ecological challenges and opportunities in deprived communities and the changes in the working landscape or digitization of rural areas. By the deadline of the 23rd of August, we were very happy with the rich contributions received, demonstrating that the urban/rural divide is still a timely topic to address in regional development studies.

In the Spotlight section, Gary Bosworth, Jason Whalley, Polly Chapman, Anita Füzi and Ian Merrell, present work from the Digit-funded research project on *The Role of Coworking Spaces in Digital Rural Futures.* They argue that the Covid-19 pandemic has sparked many questions about the future of work and employment with increasing rates of remote working expected to persist. They further highlight that the evolution of new business models for rural areas co-working centres will include corporate models targeting the most lucrative commuter-zones, public sector models seeking to promote entrepreneurship, and community-led models with multiple goals. They conclude by emphasizing that the growth of rural coworking will enhance access to networks for rural freelancers and has the potential to diffuse the centrifugal forces of "buzz" and "agglomeration" away from cities. So, the pandemic could to a certain extent result in new opportunities for the development of rural and more peripheral regions.

This Issue contains six Regional Insights articles. Elvira Uyarra, in "Constructing markets for new path development. The role of the state", contends that the pandemic context we still live in is an opportunity to change the priorities of public investment to support a recovery that is more equitable, responsible and green. However, the author also argues that the social processes that shape markets for innovation are far from being fully understood. So, the call is formulated for more normative approaches in regional innovation policy studies and for place-sensitive mission-oriented or transformative innovation policies. This article results from research conducted within the Regional Studies Association FeRSA grant. The next two articles continue discussing the new

opportunities for rural areas in relation to digitalisation and the spread of technologies. Adriana Mihaela Soaita, in “Romania’s accelerated digitalization in pandemic times: The (dis)trust-(anti)corruption nexus”, discusses the accelerated institutional digitalization prompted by the pandemic that should restrain corruption in the longer term. Her argument draws on a longitudinal-qualitative case study, which finds e-governance to be a socially trusted anticorruption mechanism, besides being a welcomed institutional reform. Sarah Diefenbach, an early career researcher, writes about “Tourism, Rural Development and Sustainability”. The author specifically focuses on whether slow tourism can serve as an effective sustainable alternative to current forms of tourism and how it can support rural development. Shekh Moinuddin, in “Contours of Internet Access in Rural-Urban Landscapes in India”, underlines that the patterns of Internet users diverge across the regions in India. For example, with the exception of Delhi and Tamil Nadu, less than fifty percent of the rural population has access to the Internet. Felix Nana Kofi Ofori discusses the socio-economic challenges and opportunities of Ghana’s coastal communities. The author contends that existing policies and structures should focus critically on the coastal communities as a strategy to draw them into the national development agenda. Serafin Pazos-Vidal closes this section by reflecting on the demographic decline across the European Union (EU). The paper provides a narrative of the genesis and eventual framing of the first-ever definition of what is a demographically declining area for the purposes of EU regional funding.

Two articles are featured in the Frontline section. In “SME Resilience during the Covid-19 Pandemic. Exploring Urban-rural differences”, Dafydd Cotterell and Robert Bowen investigate business resiliency in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, considering whether differences exist between urban and rural Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs). Before discussing evidence from the UK, the authors draw on a growing body of literature relating to crisis management and resilience. The analysis of the impacts of the pandemic continues in “Socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Marriages in Spain”, where Ana Gutiérrez Sanchis, Paula Remoaldo and Carlos Martínez de Ibarreta Zorita, discuss the results of a study concerning marriages in Spain during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, and its associated lockdown, that took place in 2020. The authors underline that in Spain, during the 1st Semester of 2020, marriages were 60.8% less than the year before in 2019. Every Spanish region was affected with a decrease of more than 50% of marriages, compared to the data of the

previous year. The losses associated with the wedding industry are not just social but mostly economic. So, some questions remain open on the effective balance between new opportunities arising and losses to administer.

This Issue's Research Hacks article sees Matt Finch and Marie Mahon share their experiences using scenario planning to explore the future of regional development in Europe. They draw their discussion on the results of the IMAJINE project, a European Commission-funded Horizon 2020 project. IMAJINE's four scenarios for the future of European regional inequality are grounded in the business environment of DG-REGIO. Authors highlight that the scenarios can serve to "wind tunnel" policy proposals for resilience, or to trigger discussions about the future of fairness in regional development.

Finally, the RSA Highlights section features three reports on the RSA Global E-Festival, Regions in Recovery. Here, Stephanie Francis Grimbert, Ana Gutierrez Sanchis and Silvia Gugu share their views of this online event, which brought together 1250 delegates from 71 countries.

The forthcoming Issue 11 will focus on **Recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic** and will be published around mid-December 2021 with a deadline for contributions by the **25th of November**.

We are happy to let you know what this Editorship has renewed the commitment with the Regional Studies Association (RSA) until 31st of December 2024. We would like to thank RSA, in particular Sally Hardy, for trusting us to perform as Editors and for the financial support. This support is essential to perform such a role with the distinguishing quality the Regional Studies community deserves. A word of gratitude to Alex Holmes, RSA Communications and Membership Manager, for the support with revisions, promotion, and interactions with prospective authors.

Editorial team

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