
DEFINING 'RURAL' 'URBAN' AND 'URBANISATION'

by Johann Graaff

1. I start from the assumption that there is no universal definition of 'rural', 'urban' or 'urbanisation'. It all depends on the work the definition is required to do and the theoretical framework within which it is cast.

Definitions may also vary from the trivial and banal to the substantive and significant. It does not seem important, for example, to spend time considering the impact of a public TV service on Ganyesa village in Bophuthatswana. This is, without doubt, a linkage which would affect urbanisation. It is not a central factor.

2. I shall interpret my brief, then, in the following way: consider the kinds of definitions which are implied by the different theoretical approaches to urbanisation. We shall see in a moment that, in consequence, urbanisation can mean two very different things. For one theoretical approach it means rural-urban migration. In this case, there is a causal link between service provision and migration.

For other theoretical approaches, there is a temptation to lapse into a tautological definition, and say that 'rural' is any place without services. Urbanisation is, in this case, not something which happens **as a result of** service provision, but is **defined by** service provision.

I take 'rural' to mean homelands, for two reasons. First, even those homeland settlements which can be regarded as functionally urban for other purposes, are, when it comes to services, effectively rural. (Settlements which, elsewhere, I have called 'peri-urban' and 'semi-urban', I would here term rural. I retain the word 'urban' for homeland settlements which have been officially proclaimed.) Second, I take the focus of this project to be Natal where agricultural mechanisation, the 1913 Land Act and population resettlement programmes have already moved many people off commercial farms. I do not expect significant migration to be taking place from 'White' farms to urban areas. The position would be different in the Transvaal, for example, where substantial squatter settlements are to be found outside homelands.

3. There are two theoretical levels at which we may proceed: the micro-, household decision-making level; and the macro-, political and economic level. That needs emphasising since there is a temptation to remain at the micro-level in urbanisation

thinking. Micro-level thinking is important since it delivers tangible, short-term benefits for particular members of particular households. But the context of household decision-making is set by macro-factors. That is why household decision-making in 1989 in Natal is quite a different story from decision-making in 1949 or 1929.

I shall start with migration theories at the micro-level.

4. The question to address at this level is: which services will significantly affect the decisions of various household members to migrate temporarily or permanently to urban areas? From the perspective of the individual household, 'rural' can mean the following things:

- (a) a place for children to be educated away from the socially and politically disruptive environment of the 'locations';
- (b) a place to have some land and cattle in order to maintain tribal links, provide some supplementary income, provide a welfare substitute, and form the nucleus of a retirement nest-egg;
- (c) a place for pensioners and women who bring up children and watch over or work agricultural resources.

From this perspective 'rural' is derivative of, a mirror-image of 'urban'. 'Urban' can be the following things:

- (a) a place for significant income from either the formal or informal economic sectors;
- (b) a source of consumer goods and entertainment.

A great deal of what happens in rural areas is dependent on what happens in urban areas. Whether agricultural activities are carried on, or children go to school depends on whether the money arrives from town. (This also has the result that the provision of services in urban areas has critical rural consequences. Put differently, a great deal of rural development happens in urban areas.)

In this context significant rural services will be:

- (i) schools, especially at the secondary level, and creches;
- (ii) information on employment opportunities in town;
- (iii) postal communication which delivers remittances and pensions;
- (iv) water, which often takes women or children many hours to collect and is the source of most rural diseases;
- (v) electricity, as substitute for paraffin, coal and wood;
- (vi) transport.

5. The macro-perspective, by contrast, looks at urbanisation through the eyes of various industrial and government sectors. Let me start with capital's interest in various types of labour.

For Marxists, capital sees homelands as sources of either subsidised labour for the mining industry (Wolpe), 'outsider' labour for manufacturing (Hindson) or enclave female labour for light industries and textiles (Bell; Cobbett et al.) In this context, 'rural' means a place without significant power which has, over time, been nudged, persuaded or bullied into service of urban interests. 'Rural' means peripheral. The rural-urban linkage is a functional, often functionalist, one.

From capital's point of view, critical services are:

- (i) commuter transport subsidised by central government,
- (ii) the suppression or control of trade unions by homeland governments,
- (iii) the transfer of service provision to homeland governments, which often means quite a low welfare level,
- (iv) the existence of some level of subsistence agriculture to subsidise household incomes,
- (v) homeland apprentice training programmes free of White trade union control,
- (vi) decentralisation incentive schemes by central

and homeland governments, and

- (vii) (I suspect) lower levels of inspection and discipline in sanitation, employee safety and pollution.

Commuter settlements vary considerably across the country. But, in one sense, they are all rural, even the ones proclaimed urban, in their lack of access to effective trade union representation and political representation at the homeland government level.

6. The political side of the macro-perspective starts with the South African government's aim of establishing political outlets for Africans who are excluded from representation at the central government level. Much of that intent is mediated by homeland governments/administrations whose central concerns, for our purposes, are political survival, political credibility and self-enrichment (although we need to rethink some of this for Mabuza and the recent Holomisa, perhaps).

From their point of view, 'urban' means the, frequently bureaucratic, people who need appeasement, employment, housing and other benefits in return for political support or acquiescence. In cash-strapped economies, 'rural' are the people who are neglected in investment and development terms. They are the wrong tribal group, the wrong class, they have an ineffectual chief, they lack effective administrations to make development schemes work.

From the perspective of these rural people, critical services might be:

- (i) legal advice and media coverage,
- (ii) effective development co-ordinators, facilitators and managers.

I have in mind a great deal of what happens at the Mboza project in Northern Natal (Details are provided in two papers by P.J. Derman and C. Poultney, viz. [1] "The politics of production and community development in Rural South Africa", Carnegie Conference Paper No. 226, U.C.T., 1984 and [2] "Agricultural reconstruction in a consumer society : the Mboza Village Project", Development Southern Africa, Vol 4, No 3, August 1987, pp. 553-568) □