

The interface between rural communities in South Africa and their urban counterparts: the significance for sustainable rural community development in the Vaalharts area

B. van Schalkwyk, C. Schoeman & J. Cilliers
*Unit for Environmental Sciences and Management,
North-West University Potchefstroom, South Africa*

Abstract

Even though Africa is one of the least urbanized regions in the world it is also the region in which cities grow the fastest, resulting in urban areas experiencing a wide spectrum of problems while rural areas are left drained. It is widely acknowledged that the vast majority of rural inhabitants in developing countries live below the poverty line, but what is not so widely known is the extent to which the livelihoods and well-being of these rural areas are linked to their urban counterparts.

It has become increasingly difficult to separate communities into rural or urban entities/areas due to many households relying on both urban and rural based resources, this is especially true in South Africa where the Apartheid legacy has had a lingering effect on urban-rural linkages. In South Africa the interdependence between rural communities and distant cities are higher than elsewhere with many rural residents living in urban domains while maintaining family, social and financial ties in rural areas.

Rural areas in South Africa have been experiencing economic and social decay over the past decades due to urban migration and this in turn has reduced the provision of services, facilities and employment opportunities in rural areas. It is due to these factors that the concept of sustainable rural community development is of particular relevance to South Africa. Sustainable rural community development is necessary in order to achieve more integrated and sustainable rural areas with a better environment and a higher quality of life and an understanding of the complex linkages between urban and rural areas is required for the



successful planning of rural sustainable development. This paper examines how these multifaceted linkages impacts on sustainable community development in the unique case of the Vaalharts area.

Keywords: sustainable rural community development, rural-urban linkages.

1 Introduction

Tostensen *et al.* [1] argue that while Africa is one of the least urbanised regions in the world it is also the region in which towns and cities grow the fastest. This results in urban areas experiencing a shortage of employment and housing, increasing poverty, severe environmental problems and a lack of services while rural areas are left drained. By 2001 57% of the South African population was urbanised [2] and this percentage has risen during the last decade with the United Nations [3] estimating that 67.9% of the South African population will be living in cities by 2025. Smit [4] states that “after the abolition of influx control in 1986, but especially after 1994, many hopeful people started streaming to South Africa’s cities and towns”. Rural migrants looking for a better life inevitably end up in backyard shacks and informal settlements, making the task of providing adequate and affordable services a continuous battle for local government.

South African cities developed in a distorted, fragmented and uneven manner under the Apartheid regime. This development included unequal distributions of resources, power, democracy and freedom of movement to the city inhabitants [2]. The Apartheid legacy in South Africa has only made the usual problems associated with urbanisation, such as housing and service delivery, more complex. It also has a lingering effect on urban-rural linkages.

Behera [5] acknowledges that the majority of citizens in developing countries that live below the poverty line are residents of rural areas. Elliot [6] states that due to the fact that more than three-quarters of the world’s poor live in rural areas the Millennium Development Goals of halving poverty and hunger will not be met without first reducing rural poverty. The livelihoods and well-being of rural areas are also closely linked to environmental resources and ecological systems. This emphasises the need to achieve sustainable rural communities.

In African countries migration to the city far exceeds the capacity of these cities to accommodate their new residents. Van Bueren *et al.* [7] state that “cities do not fulfil the promise of a better life that made people leave their rural villages for”. Sustainable rural community development is necessary in order to achieve more integrated and sustainable rural areas with a better environment and a higher quality of life. It is due to these factors that the concept of sustainable rural community development is of specific relevance to South Africa.

2 Urban-rural linkages in South Africa

According to Elliot [6] it has become increasingly more difficult to separate people into ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ as many households rely on both rural-based and urban-based resources. The White Paper on Local Government [8] acknowledges that “almost all towns are functionally linked to rural areas, relying on their



hinterland for productive economic activity and providing critical centres for the delivery of social services”.

Fair [9] is of the opinion that the endeavour for rural-urban balance that is so often reflected in development strategies is due to the fact that “governments are concerned not only that rural-urban migration is draining the countryside of much of its productive labour force, but that uncontrolled urban growth is making rising demands on employment, housing, transport, sanitation and other services”. This statement plainly illustrates that a link exists between rural and urban areas and that is an important aspect to consider in planning. Elliot [6] states that “migrancy is also just the most visible form of the many interconnections and multidirectional flows between urban and rural”. Fair [9] states that “migration to towns is not only permanent, it is also circulatory, with people moving back and forth sending or taking back to their rural homes part of the cash earned or goods bought or skills learned in towns”. Ravetz [10] is of the opinion that urbanisation and counter-urbanisation are two parts of the same coin and that both of these threaten the viability of urban, as well as rural areas. Many rural residents live in urban dormitories while still maintaining family and social ties in rural areas. This urban-rural linkage takes a particular form in South Africa where the level of interdependence between rural communities and distant cities is higher than elsewhere [11]. South Africa also experiences the phenomenon of transitional migration. People migrate from rural areas to urban centres to find work while maintaining strong ties with their roots. After their working period is over they migrate back towards the rural areas from which they came. Figure 1 illustrates a few of the linkages that exist between urban and rural areas

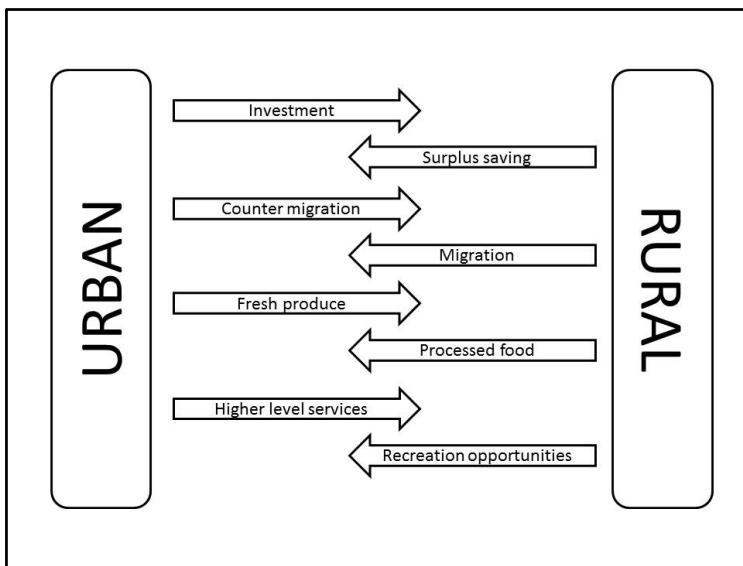


Figure 1: Urban-rural linkages. Source: Own construction.

The economic status of rural areas is inextricably linked to urban areas. Gallent *et al.* [12] state that “those rural areas with the weakest connections to urban areas seem to be those with the weakest economies”. Rural areas in South Africa have been experiencing economic and social decay over the past decades due to urban migration. Layard *et al.* [13] reason that this has in turn reduced the provision of services, facilities and employment opportunities in rural areas. Many residents of small rural towns need to travel to nearby larger urban centres to gain access to certain services, such as hospitals and often even schools.

Research by Behera [5] has argued that the term rural development used to comprise of state-led policies and programmes to shape the rural landscape to meet the urban need. It is thus imperative that rural development initiatives are so planned that they not only contribute to the urban wellbeing but that they also contribute to sustainable livelihoods for rural residents, taking into consideration the remoteness and potentials of rural areas [14].

3 Defining sustainable rural community development

According to Elliot [6] sustainable development plainly refers to maintaining development over time. By this definition a sustainable community can be seen as a community in which development is maintained over time. Portney [15] reasons that the idea of sustainable communities grew out of the understanding that individual human behaviour, and the local governance context in which it takes place is of vital importance. Since the term community has come to imply many different things to many different people the idea of a sustainable community itself has come to mean many different things. Portney [15] goes on to state that “a sustainable community can be anything from a small neighbourhood, to a group of people who share some interests, to a program operated by a governmental or nongovernmental organization, to a rather localized ecosystem, to a multistate region encompassing numerous ecosystems”. In the case of this study a sustainable community is seen as a geographically bounded area in which the residents meet their diverse needs while making effective use of natural resources, enhancing the environment, achieving social cohesion and strengthening their economic prosperity in such a manner that the needs of future generations will be met.

Most often rural community development refers only to the economic aspects of development with little attention given to social and environmental factors. The World Bank [16] has defined rural development as a strategy designed to improve the economic and social life of the rural poor. According to Gangopadhyay *et al.* [17] “rural development aims at improving rural people’s livelihoods in an equitable and sustainable manner, both socially and environmentally, through better access to assets, and services, and control over productive capital that enable them to improve their livelihoods on a sustainable and equitable basis”. The United Nations [14] advocates for sustainable rural development stating that it is vital to the economic, environmental and social viability of nations.

The approaches to rural planning often vary and that this leads to confusion between planners, policy-makers and implementers [18]. This can be seen clearly in South Africa where, until 1995, rural areas were defined as households not



living in formally declared towns. Many of these areas defined as rural were in reality merely urban areas without services. In the new democratic era rural is now defined as “the sparsely populated areas in which people farm or depend in natural resources, including villages and small towns that are dispersed through these areas” [19]. This definition is not necessarily an astute one as many households fall into both rural and urban categories since they derive their incomes from an assortment of sources. Gallent *et al.* [12] advises defining a rural area based on an analysis of land-use mix, settlement structure and the way of life of its inhabitants. A rural area is thus seen as an area dominated by farming and forestry, made up of small, low order settlements and having a cohesive identity that is linked to an extensive landscape.

Achieving sustainable community development in rural South Africa is doubly challenging due to a myriad of factors. The legacy of previous policies, such as the former homelands system during the Apartheid era, has left rural South Africa with many high-density population areas and dislocated settlement where residents live in abject poverty. These past injustices hamper efforts of rural residents to maintain intact families and ensure a livelihood for themselves. Rural areas in South Africa have experienced economic and social decay over the past decades due to urban migration. Layard *et al.* [13] reason that this has in turn reduced the delivery of services, facilities and employment opportunities in these areas. Rural areas are also beleaguered with a lack of education and skills [20] which makes the task of finding adequate employment even harder. Furthermore the ISRDS [11] argues that HIV/AIDS poses an extensive challenge to rural development in South Africa due to the fact that it impacts on a wide range of developmental factors. Rural areas are generally less equipped with resources to address these challenges, increasing the vulnerability of rural households.

Gallent *et al.* [12] defines a sustainable rural community as possessing the following attributes:

- A flourishing local economy that is able to provide employment and contribute to wealth creation;
- Engagement and participation by the residents;
- A sense of identity and belonging;
- Being a safe and happy place where residents have access to open recreational spaces;
- Basic amenities, community services and community facilities;
- A good public transport systems which aids in connecting the community with a larger network of services, employment and other opportunities;
- Adaptable spaces that can be used for different purposes;
- A variation in housing and tenure types; and
- Being connected to the wider local, regional and national community.

4 Status quo in the Vaalharts area

The Vaalharts area lies across the border of the North West and Northern Cape provinces of South Africa. This area was settled and developed due to the implementation of an irrigation system in the 1930s. It has since become the



largest irrigation system in the Southern Hemisphere. The area is considered to be fairly geographically isolated. The Vaalharts area is made up of a few communities of which Valspan, Ganspan, Jan Kempdorp and Andalusia Park are considered the core. All of these communities are characterised by an alarmingly high unemployment rate, as most residents are seasonal workers on the local farms.

While basic services such as grocery stores, clinics and schools are available the quality of services are usually poor. There are three high schools, four primary schools, one combined school and 3 clinics available to an estimated 57,000 residents. If residents require any serious medical attention they need to travel 25km to Hartswater or 100km to Kimberley to receive help (refer to Figure 2).

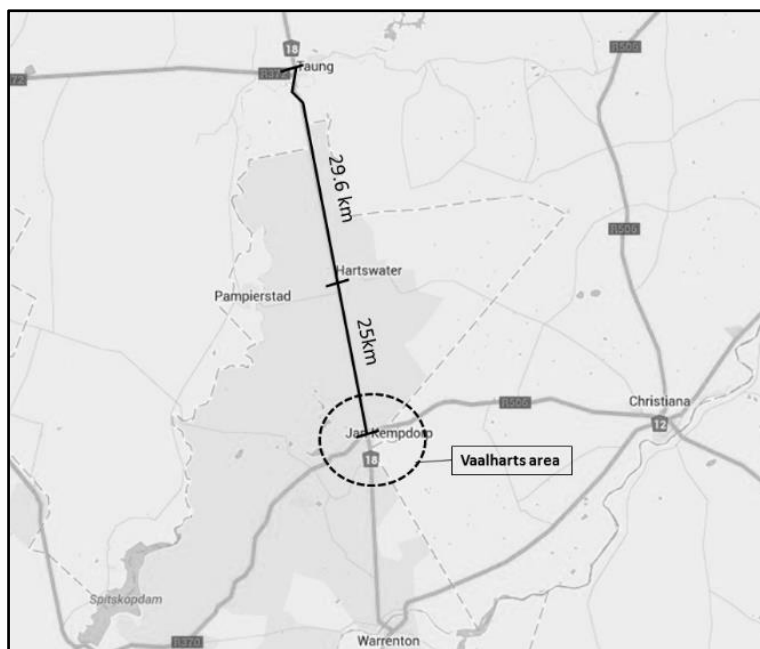


Figure 2: Distance from the Vaalharts area to the nearest hubs. Source: Own construction.

While most residents are employed locally a large portion of their income is not spent locally as they often travel to Hartswater or Taung to do their shopping. A hefty percentage of their income is also spent on transportation as a minibus taxi costs up to R3.50 (\$0.33) per kilometre which amounts to a sizeable amount to people whose primary source of income are government grants. Figure 2 shows the location of the Vaalharts area with regard to its closest neighbouring urban centres. Where in many towns the residents that can afford to travel the further

distance towards better shops or services do, Vaalharts shows the opposite phenomenon, with rich and poor frequenting the same facilities and stores.

Researchers at the North West University have described the area as having mental poverty. They state that this mental poverty is attributed to the fact that the residents do not strive for a better quality of life than they already have. Unlike most other communities in South Africa they do not wish to strive towards urbanization or a better living environment. They feel that if they have enough resources to survive from day to day that they can consider themselves lucky. During a needs-assessment done in 2011 the people of Vaalharts identified agricultural knowledge and basic government services as their main needs [21].

While it is true that most of the people in the area work locally the Vaalharts area still maintains a strong economic link with other urban centres. Most of the local produce is exported to other towns and cities where they are further manufactured and then shipped back to Vaalharts. The final product is then sold to local residents at over inflated prices.

5 The significance of urban–rural linkages for sustainable rural community development in the Vaalharts area

In its Integrated Sustainable Rural Development Strategy (ISRDS) the South African Government [11] acknowledges the fact that successful planning for rural sustainable development requires an understanding of the complex linkages between urban and rural areas. The ISRDS goes on to state that in order to obtain comprehensive regional development urban-rural linkages must be strengthened.

This statement is echoed by Dewar who expressed concerns about the artificial divisions between strategies dealing with urban and rural development noting that, “For too long, ‘urban development’ and ‘rural development’ have been polarised and pursued in almost total isolation” resulting in narrow and oversimplified conceptions of rural development being about agriculture and urban development being about the management of big cities [22]. Unfortunately to date policy making on urban and rural development have remained largely isolated from one another.

Strengthening urban-rural linkages will contribute significantly to the achievement of sustainable rural communities. Table 1 illustrates how stronger urban-rural links can assist the Vaalharts area in attaining the characteristics of a sustainable rural community [12], as mentioned earlier.

The most effective way of solidifying an urban-rural link is through an effective public transportation system. For a public transport system to be effective and sustainable in a rural community, such as Vaalharts, it has to be affordable to the local residents, reliable, extensive enough to cover a reasonable area and create local job opportunities.



Table 1: Contribution of urban-rural links to sustainable rural community development.

Sustainable rural community characteristic	Contribution of stronger urban-rural links
Flourishing local economy with employment opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New markets for export of local produce • Investment in local ventures by external investors • Increased tourism
Engagement and participation by residents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to better information and government services
Sense of identity and belonging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Certain services such as libraries and government services can be mobilised to ensure that residents gain access to the services but that the rural identity of the area isn't compromised
Safe open recreational spaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well defined and delineated open spaces planned holistically to contribute to both urban and rural spheres
Basic amenities, community services and facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Services which aren't financially feasible in the area can be accessed in urban areas to avoid a budget deficit
A good public transportation system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Close urban centres can provide access to a greater transportation network such as international airports, ports and train stations
Adaptable spaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Urban areas can provide certain open spaces which are not available in rural areas due to practicality issues
A variation in housing and tenure types	-
Connection with the wider community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Urban areas cater to a wide variety of transportation types, such as airports, which provide access to the wider community

Source: Own construction based on Gallent *et al.* [12].

6 Conclusions and recommendations

The dependence of rural areas on their urban counter parts is widely known, and vice versa is also true. Rural areas provide food and natural resources to urban areas while towns and cities provide employment and a market base to rural areas. The link between the two should be strengthened to enhance advantages within both. Thus far policies and development strategies have mainly benefitted urban



areas and this trend needs to be reversed in order to salvage what remains of our rural areas and to create a better quality of life to their inhabitants.

One approach to strengthen the link between urban and rural areas to ensure mutual benefit is to develop the rural area according to its strengths and opportunities. In the case of the Vaalharts area agriculture was identified as its main strength and opportunity during a SWOT analysis [21]. If the agriculture of the Vaalharts area were to be further developed it would create more local jobs, uplifting the local community, and it would provide more resources to be exported to urban centres, benefitting both the local and urban economy. If the linkages between urban and rural entities are strengthened the sustainable community characteristics mentioned in Table 1 can also be achieved and enhanced.

The Vaalharts area defies the norm as it applies to the mentality of rural areas in South Africa since the residents in the area do not strive towards the 'western' goal of urbanization and first world life. It is important to them to maintain their rural character and cultural existence. Plans and strategies for service delivery have to take this important factor into consideration and adjustments in the normal method of service provision have to be made. It is advised that mobile units be used to provide basic government services, such as mobile libraries and clinics. Higher order services can be accessed in nearby urban centres, and to this end an affordable transport system should be created. It is advised that subsidies be given to local taxi drivers to provide their services at a lower cost to residents. This will reduce the cost of travel, provide employment and boost the local economy.

Acknowledgements

This research was made possible by the financial contribution of the NRF (National Research Foundation) South Africa. Any opinion, findings and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those on the author(s) and therefor the NRF does not accept any liability in regard thereto.

References

- [1] Tostensen, A.; Tvedten, I. & Vaa, M. 2001. Associational life in African cities – popular responses to the urban crisis. Stockholm: Elanders Gotab.
- [2] Collins, J. 2001. Urbanisation.
<http://www.bcb.uwc.ac.za/envfacts/facts/urbanisation.htm>
- [3] United Nations. 2012. South Africa: Demographic profile 1950–2025.
<http://esa.un.org/unup/unup/p2k0data.asp>
- [4] Smit, F. 2010. Protesting for better lives. The Witness. 27 Mar.
http://www.witness.co.za/index.php?showcontent&global%5B_id%5D=38009
- [5] Behera, M.C. 2006. Globalising rural development – competing paradigms and emerging realities. London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- [6] Elliot, J. A. 2013. An Introduction to Sustainable Development: Fourth Edition. London: Routledge.



- [7] Van Bueren, E.; Van Bohemen, H.; Itard, L. & Visscher, H. 2012. Sustainable urban environments: an ecosystems approach. London: Springer.
- [8] South Africa. Department of Provincial Affairs and Constitutional Development. 1998. White Paper on Local Government.
http://www.google.co.za/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&frm=1&source=web&cd=1&sqi=2&ved=0CCgQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fmfma.treasury.gov.za%2Fmfma%2FGuidelines%2Fwhitepaper.pdf&ei=TnN3UviMCZKT0QX_qICADQ&usg=AFQjCNEk7x9WR7Ph0AySokYNAcE-A3tug
- [9] Fair, T.J.D. 1992. African rural development: policy and practice in six countries. Johannesburg: Colourpress Ltd.
- [10] Ravetz, J. 2000. City region 2020 – Integrated planning for a sustainable environment. Glasgow: Bell & Bain Ltd.
- [11] South African Government. 2000. The Integrated Sustainable Rural Development Strategy.
- [12] Gallent, N.; Juntti, M.; Kidd, S. & Shaw, D. 2008. Introduction to rural planning. New York: Routledge.
- [13] Layard, A.; Davoudi, S. & Batty, S. 2001. Planning for a Sustainable Future. New York: Spon Press.
- [14] United Nations. 2009. Rural Development Commission on Sustainable Development, Decisions by Topic: Rural development.
<http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?menu=1263>
- [15] Portney, K.E. 2003. Taking sustainable cities seriously: economic development, the environment, and quality of life in American cities. Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- [16] World Bank. 2013. Agriculture and Rural Development.
<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTARD/0,,contentMDK:20445375~menuPK:1308541~pagePK:148956~piPK:216618~theSitePK:336682,00.html>
- [17] Gangopadhyay, D.; Mukhopadhyay, A.K. & Singh, P. 2008. Rural Development: A strategy for poverty alleviation India.
<http://www.nistads.res.in/indiasnt2008/t6rural/t6rur3.htm>
- [18] Dalal-Clayton, B. & Bass, S. 2002. Sustainable development strategies: a resource book. London: Earthscan Publications Ltd.
- [19] South Africa. Department of Land Affairs. 1997. Rural Development Framework.
<http://www.polity.org.za/polity/govdocs/rdp/rdevframe.html#1>
- [20] Fox, W. & Van Rooyen, E. 2004. The Quest for Sustainable Development. Cape Town: Juta & Co. Ltd.
- [21] Research logistics. 2011. Research report 2: Needs assessment conducted in the Vaalharts region, North West and Northern Cape Provinces, South Africa.
- [22] Dewar, D. (1994). Reconstructing the South African countryside: The small towns. Development Southern Africa Volume 11(3), 351–362.

